

# **1. Martin Luther King, Jr., Amos, and the Vietnam War**

by Andrew Zack Lewis

## **2. Introduction**

In Martin Luther King's later years, as he becomes more frustrated by the lack of progress of his movement, as his influence wanes, and as the Vietnam War escalates, he shifts his persona as an antitype of Moses to an antitype of the prophets—not leading people toward his dream, but crying out in the wilderness for justice. In particular, he seems to identify most closely to the prophet Amos. This paper argues that in his first major public denunciation of the Vietnam War, King uses Amos as a model of a prophet crying out against this government when his conscience will not allow him to remain silent.

## **3. King as Theologian, Preacher, and Biblical Interpreter**

Though the public perceives King as mainly a civil rights leader, whose Christian Theology is incidental, King saw himself as first and foremost a preacher.<sup>1</sup> His sermons and speeches are the culmination of a childhood saturated with the language of the Black Church, a young adulthood spent studying theology formally in the academy, and, according to one of his teachers, a "mind and heart deeply steeped in biblical teaching."<sup>2</sup> Though many have highlighted King's formal training in seminary and in his doctoral work, pointing to his studies of Niebuhr and Tillich, among other major theological minds, more recently scholars have noted the major influence of the Black church on his thought. It was the Black church, in particular, that inspired his use of the Bible, which undergirds much of his writings. Luther Ivory notes that King "was... a product of a black religious tradition that regarded the Scripture as the most important lens through which to interpret reality."<sup>3</sup> Richard Lischer describes the role of the Bible in the Black church as a mirror that the preacher holds up to the congregation, to which "the people respond by recognizing themselves in it."<sup>4</sup>

Keith Miller, who is one of the foremost scholars on the rhetoric and sources of King's speeches and sermons, describes the use of the Bible in black folk sermons as one where the Bible is the sole authority that undergirds the argument of the sermon. That is, truth is already proclaimed in the Bible, and other truths must agree with those found in

Scripture.<sup>5</sup> The biblical story that black folk preachers, along with King raise up to their congregation more than any other is that of the Exodus.

## 4. Typology as Hermeneutical Method for Biblical Interpretation

### (a) Exodus as Archetype

King's first major public address exploited the typology inherent in his cultural upbringing. African American slaves viewed the Exodus of the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage as archetypal of their own hopes and experiences. In May 1956, on the two year anniversary of the landmark court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, King was asked to preach at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City and gave a sermon called "The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore," in which he highlighted liberation movements from around the world as indicative of God's Providence displayed in that early episode of Israel.<sup>6</sup> Exodus, therefore, is a paradigm for God's activities in world history.<sup>7</sup>

Obviously, Exodus remained an important type from which to draw for King up until his death. His final speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," posits King as Moses looking into a promised land that lies in the future. Between these two landmark speeches lies multiple references to the Exodus in the Civil Rights movement in the United States. For instance, the march to Selma acts as an antitype to the Exodus out of Egypt.<sup>8</sup>

Explicit antitypes of the Exodus abound in the work of King and the Black church in general, but the Exodus so saturates the culture that imagery often lies implicitly in the works of King that are not evident to casual listeners. Keith Miller argues that King's "I Have a Dream" speech:

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.<sup>9</sup>

Miller highlights direct quotes from King of Isaiah 40:4-5, which, to biblically literate readers, refers to Isaiah's new Exodus from Babylon. The typology that Second Isaiah employs gives license to King to employ it as well. Second Isaiah broadens the scope of the Exodus of Israel from Egypt to a hope for all oppressed peoples, since "every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill shall be made low" in King's dream.<sup>10</sup> Miller's claim, then, is that by

invoking this passage in the litany of dreams at the end of the speech, King is extending the typology of the Exodus beyond the immediate context of Second Isaiah to all of history. He also claims that this is the key to understanding the speech. Miller argues that Second Isaiah has landed in Washington D.C. to present an oracle of a new Exodus vicariously through the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Miller also notes that King invokes the words of Amos in his speech and that Amos's argument that God's Providence extends beyond the the children of Israel and Judah emerges in Amos's declaration that both the Syrians and Philistines experienced an Exodus.<sup>11</sup> Amos emerges frequently in King's speeches, particularly Amos 5:24, "let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream," which is a common refrain for him throughout his career. However, years after "I Have a Dream," when King's influence has waned considerably, and his optimism becomes strained by setbacks toward civil rights and especially the escalating war in Vietnam, King seems to embody the prophet Amos in a more profound way.

## **5. King's last years**

### **(a) Loss of influence**

Shortly after giving his famous speech in Washington, he won the Nobel Peace Prize and Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act. However, other events depressed him to the point that he would declare that his dream had become a nightmare, such as "when four beautiful, unoffending, innocent Negro girls were murdered in a church in Birmingham... [when he] moved through the ghettos of the nation and saw [his] black brothers and sisters perishing on a lonely island of poverty... [when he] watched [his] black brothers and sisters in the midst of anger and understandable outrage... turn to misguided riots to try to solve" their problems.<sup>12</sup>

The other major issue that he claims turned his dream into a nightmare is the Vietnam War, which, along with his acceptance of the Nobel Prize, forced him more and more to address global issues that went beyond the civil rights for blacks in the United States. Though he does not seem to have changed his philosophy on the interconnectedness of all justice and injustice, he had resisted up until America's conflict overseas forced him into it.

### **(b) Interconnectedness of Justice**

In his short book, *The Measure of a Man* (1959), King writes:

We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, and whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you are not what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God's universe is made; this is the way it is structured.<sup>13</sup>

Despite this early sentiment and other, similar reactions to his trip to India in 1957, most people still saw King as merely a leader of civil rights in the somewhat narrow construct of mid-Century America. His acknowledgment of other issues that seemed to go beyond the immediate issue of segregation like the problem of poverty in general and economic inequality beyond racial inequality as well as state-supported violence against nations half-way around the world confused some of his allies in the civil rights movement. Lyndon Johnson went from being one of his supporters in desegregation to one of his targets in his criticisms of the Vietnam War.

His waning popularity, coupled with a conscience that needed him to respond to the violent activity overseas finally led to a strikingly condemnatory speech at Riverside Church in New York City, one year to the day before his death.

## **6. Beyond Vietnam as Reflection of Amos**

### **(a) Genre of Beyond Vietnam**

The speech "Beyond Vietnam," alternatively titled "A Time to Break Silence," at first glance bears little in common with his other famous addresses. In particular, the speeches and sermons mentioned previously, "The Death of Evil on the Seashore," "I Have a Dream," and "I've Been to the Mountain Top," not only use the Exodus typology to illumine the argument, but they follow deductive logic typical of black folk sermons. "Beyond Vietnam," by contrast, embodies an inductive argument, amassing large amounts of evidence to prove his argument.<sup>14</sup> Keith Miller is largely critical of "Beyond Vietnam" since it lacks the rhetorical thrust of King's more typical sermons, also pointing to its lack of biblical references. Though Miller is partially correct that biblical references are sparser than in other sermons, I should point out that many iterations of the speech lack the final section, where he finishes the speech with Amos 5:24. Miller's source is one of these versions.

Though explicit references to the Bible are rare in "Beyond Vietnam," it is my contention that the entire speech parallels the book of Amos in many ways and the generic differences between it and his other sermons contributes to these parallels.

### **(b) King's early identification with the prophet Amos**

King had obviously appreciated the prophet Amos early in his career since he often quotes Amos 5:24. He also occasionally compares Amos to Jesus, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Jefferson, whom he claims are all "maladjusted" to the social order of the world and which should compel people to be likewise maladjusted. Likewise, in his famous "Letter from a Birmingham City Jail," he writes, "Just as the eighth century prophets left their little villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns... I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular hometown."<sup>15</sup> Obviously, Amos, Micah, and Isaiah are the prophets to whom he refers.

### **(c) Decision to oppose Vietnam War**

### **(d) Radical Identification with Amos in 1967**

When circumstances compelled King to oppose the Vietnam War publicly it seems he begins to identify more heavily with Amos and his parallels with the prophet do seem striking enough to notice the identification, even if King did not recognise it himself.

The brief descriptions of the character of Amos in his eponymous book point to a person with whom a mid-century black civil rights leader might have identified, particularly one criticised for "overstepping his role." Though no one seems quite sure of Amos's social standing at the time of his prophecies, at the time of King's activity, most considered Amos to be poor and subservient to the upper classes. One scholar describes him as having "belonged to one of the poorest and most exploited classes, that of the manual labourers, which came into being in Israel... following the dissolution of the traditional tribal structures..."<sup>16</sup> We are certain that Amos was somewhat an outsider, coming from Tekoa in Judah, while prophesying against Israel. When Amos does speak out against the abuses of power and hypocrisy in the Northern Kingdom, Amaziah criticises him for being an outsider unqualified to speak out against the state.

Martin Luther King, though not a shepherd or orchard keeper, does come from the underclasses of his time. The establishment had come to accept him for promoting civil rights for African-Americans, but when he began to criticise the Johnson administration for its role in the war, the government and the national newspapers attacked him and attempted to belittle him for "getting out of his depth."<sup>17</sup>

In King's autobiography, he explains his reason for denouncing violence in Asia with a quote from Amos himself:

And when I hear them, though I often understand the source of their concern, I nevertheless am greatly saddened that such questions mean that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment, or my calling. They seem to forget that before I was a civil rights leader, I answered a call, and **when God speaks, who can but prophesy.**<sup>18</sup>

## **(e) Parallels between Beyond Vietnam and Amos**

### **(i) negativity**

When King does finally speak out, with the incendiary "Beyond Vietnam," more parallels emerge with the largely negative oracles of Amos. Rather than the lofty dreams of some of his other speeches and his confidence in a providential arc of the universe bending towards justice, he spends most of his speech condemning the United States for prosecuting an unjust war while injustices still rage at home. While Amos in chapter 4 compares Israel to the Egypt God helped it escape when he writes, "I sent plagues among you as I did to Egypt" (4:10), King compares America's crimes against the peasants of Vietnam with the Germans it defeated in World War II. King writes, "What do they think as we test out our latest weapons on them, just as the Germans tested out new medicine and new tortures in the concentration camps of Europe?"<sup>19</sup> King calls his own government "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today."<sup>20</sup>

### **(ii) International in scope**

Though King and Amos both reserve their greatest criticisms for their own governments, they still share an international focus. Justice knows no boundaries in these particular works. Amos's criticisms of other nations are more extensive than King's, but they are really meant to call greater attention on the crimes and hypocrisies of his countrymen. He begins his prophecy with oracles against Israel's neighbors, making the rhetoric of his eventual condemnation of Israel that much more cutting. King's condemnations are embedded in his arguments and lack the teeth of Amos's, but they do serve the same purpose—that of putting greater focus on the sins of his own country. He says:

This speech is not addressed to Hanoi or to the National Liberation Front. It is not addressed to China or to Russia. Nor is it an attempt to overlook the ambiguity of the total situation... Neither is it an attempt to make North Vietnam or the National Liberation Front paragons of virtue...<sup>21</sup>

Elsewhere, King highlights France, America's ally, as an unjust coloniser of Vietnam, sparing few of his invectives.

Both speakers, therefore, recognise injustices through many nation-states, not just the ones toward which the speeches themselves are directed. Likewise, they recognise the international nature of God's liberative grace. Just as Amos notes that God delivered the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir (9:7), King recognises the liberation movement in North Vietnam as one that seeks justice from cruel colonisers, one of which, Diem, the U.S. supported. In other writings of the same era, King gives encouragement to other liberation movements throughout the world and that sentiment is present in this speech.<sup>22</sup>

### **(iii) The Problem of Poverty**

Though both King and Amos have international concerns, their main focus is domestic poverty and issues that distract from its alleviation. Amos rails against the cult in its collusion with the state and other powerful people. Those who are wealthy enough to own two houses (3:15) seem to care nothing for justice in the streets. (4:1; 5:12) In his book of woes in chapter 6, he describes in detail extreme wealth and how God will send the wealthy into exile first. Complicit in the affluent of Israel are the religious leaders who are so corrupt that they will not hear the words of God when they do come through Amos. (7:13) The cult is obviously meaningless to the people since they wait for the ceremonies to cease in order to do more business and exploit the poor to their own gain. Amos quotes God as saying that God hates the religious festivals and will not even accept their offerings. The cult ceases its usefulness and that is the impetus for one of the biblical phrases King quotes the most in his career and the line that King uses to conclude his speech: "Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (5:23-24)

Though the ostensible subject of King's speech is the injustice of the War in Vietnam, note that the title is "Beyond Vietnam." The war, he claims, is merely a symptom of a larger problem and when he lists his reasons for "bringing Vietnam into the field of [his] moral vision," his first is that the funds going toward the war distract from the programs that went towards the "rehabilitation of [America's] poor."<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile the government sent the children of the poor to fight and die in the war itself.

King's solidarity with the poor parallels the common reception of Amos at the time—that Amos's invective "against the abuses of the rich would simply have been an expression of his solidarity with the poor and dispossessed."<sup>24</sup> The mission of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference is to save the soul of America and King feels that "a nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."<sup>25</sup> He finds materialism, racism, and militarism intrinsically related, calling them "giant triplets" that keep American society "thing-oriented" rather than "people-oriented."<sup>26</sup>

#### **(iv) Finales of Hope**

The tone of both Amos and King in "Beyond Vietnam" is angry, but not without hope. Amos ends with a brief oracle of hope that alleviates the unrelenting condemnation and announcements of impending doom. After the exile, the Lord will bring his people back and new wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills. Amos's finale resembles many of King's final statements, and "Beyond Vietnam" has a similar tone of hope, the last line being a direct quote from Amos. However, King's finale includes an ethical call that Amos lacks. It seems that for Amos, the chance to repent and hold back judgment has passed. Amos merely reminds his hearers that God will bring them back from exile once their time of punishment has passed. King, however, attempts to be constructive, suggesting concrete things that the government can do to leave Vietnam. At the same time, however, he shares with Amos the understanding that a time will arrive when it will be too late. "We are now faced with the fact, my friends, that tomorrow is today," he says, "We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time."<sup>27</sup>

#### **(f) Differences**

Obviously differences abound between the two works. Beyond Vietnam is not a direct allegory of Amos, after all. Amos does not seem much concerned with militarism and King does not seem concerned with idolatry or empty religiosity. Regardless, King's identification with Amos allows him to use Amos as a model for his own speech.

The overall tone is more important here than whether King applies specific complaints of Amos to his own situation. King normally overlooks the specifics of oracles of woe in the ancient world for the universal hope that comes with their eschatological vision. It is no wonder why King consistently, throughout his career, relies on specific eschatological visions

of the prophets: a day when "every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low," (Isaiah 40:4) when "Men will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations will not rise up against nations; neither shall they study war any more," (Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3) when "the lion and the lamb will lay down together,"<sup>28</sup> and when "justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." These are the dreams of the prophets in the midst of troubled times and they are the dreams of King in his own troubled times. The future has not yet arrived, but King and the prophets hope for the same future. Their presents, however, differ, and King responds to the specific problems that he encounters, which, though related, are obviously not identical to those of Amos. Nevertheless, similarities do exist and it should not surprise anyone that a preacher who views the Bible as a mirror should see himself in a prophet with some similar concerns as he has.

## 7. Conclusion

(i)

(ii)

(iii)

(iv)

(1)

(2)

Shepard, Clayborne Carson and Kris, (ed.) *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Little, Brown and Comany, 2001.

deWolf, L. Harold. "Martin Luther King, Jr., as Theologian." *Journal of the Interdenominational Center* 4 (1977): 1-11.

Ivory, Luther D. *Toward a Theology of Radical Involvement: The Theological Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. 1956. The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore. [http://mlk-](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/papers/vol3/560517.010-)

[The\\_Death\\_of\\_Evil\\_upon\\_the\\_Seashore,\\_Sermon\\_at\\_the\\_Service\\_of\\_Prayer\\_and\\_Thanksgiving\\_at\\_Cathedral\\_of\\_St.\\_John\\_the\\_Divine.htm](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/papers/vol3/560517.010-The_Death_of_Evil_upon_the_Seashore,_Sermon_at_the_Service_of_Prayer_and_Thanksgiving_at_Cathedral_of_St._John_the_Divine.htm) (accessed 4 November 2010,

Washington, James M., (ed.) *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: HarperOne, 1990.

Carson, Clayborne, (ed.) *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* London: Abacus,

2000.

Lischer, Richard. *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. And the Word That Moved America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Miller, Keith D. *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr. And Its Sources*. New York: The Free Press, 1992.

Miller, Keith D. "Second Isaiah Lands in Washington, Dc: Martin Luther King, Jr.'S 'I Have a Dream' as Biblical Narrative and Biblical Hermeneutic." *Rhetoric Review* 26, no. 4 (2007): 405-24.

Scoggin, J. Alberto. *The Prophet Amos*. Translated by John Bowden. London: SCM, 1987.

- 
1. Keith D. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr. And Its Sources* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 112.
  2. L. Harold deWolf, "Martin Luther King, Jr., as Theologian," *Journal of the Interdenominational Center* 4 (1977), 1.
  3. Luther D. Ivory, *Toward a Theology of Radical Involvement: The Theological Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 53.
  4. Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. And the Word That Moved America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 218.
  5. Keith D. Miller, *Voice*, 112-13.
  6. Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore," *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, [http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/papers/vol3/560517.010-The\\_Death\\_of\\_Evil\\_upon\\_the\\_Seashore,\\_Sermon\\_at\\_the\\_Service\\_of\\_Prayer\\_and\\_Thanksgiving\\_at\\_Cathedral\\_of\\_St.\\_John\\_the\\_Divine.htm](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/papers/vol3/560517.010-The_Death_of_Evil_upon_the_Seashore,_Sermon_at_the_Service_of_Prayer_and_Thanksgiving_at_Cathedral_of_St._John_the_Divine.htm) (accessed 4 November 2010).
  7. Luther D. Ivory, *Theology of Radical Involvement*, 53-54.
  8. Richard Lischer, *Preacher King*, 197.
  9. Keith D. Miller, "Second Isaiah Lands in Washington, Dc: Martin Luther King, Jr.'S 'I Have a Dream' as Biblical Narrative and Biblical Hermeneutic," *Rhetoric Review* 26, no. 4 (2007), 405.
  10. Keith D. Miller, "Isaiah in Mlk's 'Dream'," 414.
  11. Keith D. Miller, "Isaiah in Mlk's 'Dream'," 414.
  12. James M. Washington, ed. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: HarperOne, 1990), 257.
  13. Quoted in Luther D. Ivory, *Theology of Radical Involvement*, 69.

14. Keith D. Miller, *Voice*, 149.
15. James M. Washington, *Testament of Hope*, 290.
16. J. Alberto Scoggin, *The Prophet Amos*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1987), 10.
17. Clayborne Carson, ed. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (London: Abacus, 2000), 334.
18. Clayborne Carson, *Autobiography of MLK*, 337.
19. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard, ed. *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), 149.
20. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard, *Call to Conscience*, 143.
21. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard, *Call to Conscience*, 141.
22. See James M. Washington, *Testament of Hope*, 622ff..
23. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard, *Call to Conscience*, 142.
24. J. Alberto Scoggin, *The Prophet Amos*, 10.
25. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard, *Call to Conscience*, 159.
26. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard, *Call to Conscience*, 157.
27. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard, *Call to Conscience*, 162.
28. King does not directly quote Isaiah 11:6, which says, "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them."