



The Roots of the Black Prophetic Voice



Why the Exodus
must remain central
to the African
American church.

By Jerry Taylor

Illustrations by Matt Chinworth

was 11 when I watched a documentary about Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement called “Eyes on the Prize.” Images of black women knocked to the ground by fire-hoses in Birmingham, Alabama, flashed before my eyes. Police dogs charged after people.

Angry white faces screamed racial slurs at black children seeking to enter a desegregated school.

Growing up in the Hatchie Street Church of Christ, a small black church in southwest Tennessee, I heard sermons and studied Sunday school lessons about Israelite slavery in Egypt. After watching *Eyes on the Prize*, it became clear to me that black people’s lot in America was the same as that of the Israelites in Egypt. This realization inspired me to follow in the tradition of Moses, the Old Testament prophets, the judges (whom we might call “freedom fighters”), as well as in the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.. The Old Testament speaks against the suffering and oppression black people in America experience today, and the black church—increasingly tempted toward a gospel of prosperity and middle-class comforts—needs to remain rooted in this legacy.

THE POWER OF EXODUS

The story of the exodus has had staying power in the African American church because the narrative speaks so readily to the troubles faced by its congregants. African Americans through the generations found in Exodus a God who attends to the oppressed who cry out to him:

I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I

am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey (Ex. 3:7-8).

African Americans read of a God who opposes the powerful who dehumanize God’s children. They came to believe that God heard their prayers just as he heard the prayers of the Israelites: “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt.” This is the language of election and indicates that the oppressed are God’s possession. This is God in history, who not only knows the location of the elect but knows the quality of their existence and sees their slavery as a divine illegality.

African American congregations note that God not only sees the misery of his elect, he also hears the people’s cry: “I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters.” Seeing and hearing leads God to act: “I have come down to deliver them.” The Book of Exodus reminds us that liberating action is God’s natural response when the oppressed suffer. Because God knows the pain of the Israelite slaves, God comes down to judge the oppressors and deliver the oppressed. The importance of the Old Testament—and particularly the Book of Exodus—for the African American church is its affirmation that our God is a God who sees, hears, and acts on behalf of the afflicted.

Of course, slave owners in the antebellum era understood that slaves who knew the Exodus story would find a powerful theological resource for imagining their own emancipation as a divine right. Consequently, in addition to keeping many slaves from receiving education, Christian masters who took an interest in converting their slaves used the so-called “Slave Bible” titled *Parts of the Holy Bible, selected for the use of the Negro Slaves, in the British West-India Islands*. This Bible excluded nearly 50 percent of the

New Testament and 90 percent of the Old Testament. Not surprisingly, nearly the whole Book of Exodus was removed. After all, it was not much of a leap to cast plantation owners in the role of Pharaoh, while African American slaves could easily identify with the Jews enslaved in Egypt. White slave masters understood what a powerful book this could be—and proved to be—among African American congregations.

A LIBERATION LEGACY

King, whom many African Americans viewed as the black Moses, definitely knew the suffering and misery of black people. He never let his exceptional education within a white supremacist educational system blind him to black misery. Like Moses, King's genuine encounter with the God of liberation moved him to take action to deliver his people from their kneeling posture before the intimidating throne of white Southern brutality.

In *Never to Leave Us Alone: The Prayer Life of Martin Luther King Jr.*, Lewis Baldwin notes the Old Testament's influence on King, who believed that the psalmists and prophets embodied the biblical ideal of bold action undergirded by persistent prayer. Baldwin writes, "The civil rights leader apparently had a biblically informed conception of prayer, and he found in these and other Hebrew Bible sources insights into the essence of prayer and support for his view of prayer as a daily conversation and walk with God." As Baldwin later puts it, "For King the imperative to pray came not only from a sense of personal finitude before God but also from a deep consciousness grounded in the African American religious experience, especially the traditions of the black church."

King's deep immersion in the Old Testament prophetic tradition keenly trained his eye to see the masses of poor African Americans who were being allowed to drown in the ocean of white wealth. Instead of his middle-class education in white institutions anesthetizing him to the plight of those trapped in the misery of poverty, King used his education to unleash the power of his mind and the spirit of the prophets to unleash his tongue in defense of the exploited.

This same sensitivity to the suffering of the dispossessed was profoundly present in King's mentor and confidante, Howard Thurman. In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman tells a story about the night, as a small boy, that his mother awakened him to see Halley's Comet. Speechless in their backyard, they watched the great fan of light spreading across the sky. When Howard expressed fear that the comet might hit the earth, his mother broke their silence and said, "Nothing will happen to us, Howard; God will take care of us." He goes on to write, "Many things have I seen since that night. Times without number I have learned that life

is hard, as hard as crucible steel; but as the years have unfolded, the majestic power of my mother's glowing words has come back again and again, beating out its rhythmic chant in my own spirit. Here are the faith and the awareness that overcome fear and transform it into the power to strive, to achieve... and not to yield."

This profound conviction Thurman inherited from his mother and grandmother was a conviction deeply rooted in the Exodus and the prophetic tradition. The oppressed had no other source of power to appeal to in the midst of their suffering. This posture of looking up is an implicit expectation that the God of liberation will come down to address the misery of the dispossessed.

FROM EGYPTIANS TO WHITE CHRISTIANS

Of course, the exodus story does not just help African American Christians interpret their history and experience of oppression. It also helps them interpret their white oppressors, many of whom identify as Christians. Often, white Christians tell African Americans they cannot understand the black experience. White Christians cannot understand black suffering because they have not experienced perpetual servitude and exploitation. If white Christians are to understand the experience of black oppression, there must be an intentional desire to do so.

Exodus tells the black church that their white Christian sisters and brothers are like Moses while he lived in Pharaoh's house as an heir of privilege. The Exodus narrative gives no indication that Moses took interest in the deliverance of his fellow Israelites before his mysterious encounter with God. Certainly, the education of an Egyptian prince did not include learning to care about the slaves who built Egypt's palaces and pyramids. Just as Moses was conditioned to ignore the sufferings of his own people, many white Christians have been conditioned to ignore the history of oppression of African Americans. Even white education at its best often produces people claiming to be "colorblind," which is the equivalent of being historically blind to the long history of the oppression of black people.

What African Americans learn from Exodus (and the Prophets, exilic works, and post-exilic literature) is that God is not colorblind. God hears the cries of the oppressed, sees people's oppression, and acts. When Moses comes to know the suffering of his people, he acts decisively for their salvation. True compassion leads people to act on behalf of the oppressed even to the point of putting their own life at risk. Perhaps white Christians have willfully ignored the suffering of their black sisters and brothers because they do not want to put their own bodies at risk, or even risk the loss of affection, acceptance, and love from other white people.

RETURNING TO EXODUS ROOTS

White Christians' dissociation from black suffering made it difficult for them to comprehend the black church, steeped in this Old Testament narrative, struggling for freedom throughout the civil rights movement. The Exodus was the single most influential story that whetted the appetite for liberty in the midst of black oppression. However, when the civil rights movement lost its spiritual leader in King, the next generation began to seek political entrance into the very systems of oppression still under the control of white domination. King operated like a prophet at the fringes of the system of oppression. But after King's death, the black church became less prophetically oriented.

Instead of continuing to lead the black church to the promised land, many of King's disciples led the black church backwards, back inside Pharaoh's palace of secure politics, albeit with upgraded status. The pure pursuit of political power and material wealth compromised the black church's full connection to the divine spiritual power that inspired King and the Old Testament prophets to risk their lives resisting political systems of oppression. Black preachers found it more attractive to function as politicians than as prophets speaking bold truth to the dominating systems of political control.

These prophets-turned-politicians failed to realize that white power had no compassion or concern to alleviate black suffering. Many leaders in the black church discovered that operating as politicians rather than prophets garnered them the help of good white folks. Potential black prophetic voices were accepted into white seminaries on minority scholarships worth 30 pieces of silver that eventually tamed the prophetic spirit that gave birth to the civil rights movement. The prophetic preaching tradition that once provided courageous leadership to the black church became whitewashed.

Many blacks ascended to black middle-class churches led by pastors trained in white middle-class academic institutions. Some middle-class black churches began selecting preachers who would refrain from offending black middle-class sentiments. All the while, the black middle-class church became less connected to the black underclass. Gradually, the black middle-class church had less prophetic critique of the white power structure and became more beholden to the agenda of white supremacy in religious disguise.

Nevertheless, other middle-class black Christians used their positions of influence for the liberation of the impoverished black masses. Not surprisingly, sermons in these churches were rooted in the vast expanse of Old Testament stories of God's deliverance of the oppressed from bondage. Little black girls and boys

heard sermons about Moses, Esther, Joshua, Samson, Deborah, Daniel, Nehemiah, David, Vashti, Gideon, Ruth, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Micah—heroic figures fighting against oppressive systems enslaving their people.

The black church, once rooted in a rich tradition of preaching and praying the Old Testament, shows signs of being stretched in a tug of war between the black middle class and the black underclass. As the PBS special "The Two Nations of Black America" made clear more than two decades ago, we have both the largest black middle class in history *and* the largest black underclass in history. African Americans must now pay attention to the other side of white racism, which is black classism.

Marvin McMickle, in his book *Preaching to the Black Middle Class*, sees this division between the black middle class and the underclass as perhaps the biggest challenge to the preacher in the black church. Some black middle-class churches have been more committed to staying connected to the white wealth system than connecting to the black underclass. For the black middle-class church to have credibility in the streets, the message of the black pulpit must once again address the needs of the black masses.

King was, of course, unafraid to use the pulpit wherever he found it and to draw on images from the books of Exodus and Isaiah and Amos. With a history of preachers like King and his forebears, the question today is, "Will the black middle-class church rededicate itself to seeing the misery of the oppressed black underclass?" Will the middle class hear the cries of the oppressed and develop strategies for delivering their suffering sisters and brothers?

The Old Testament compels us to be moved today with divine compassion as we look upon the suffering masses of black people in this nation. The black middle-class church must reclaim its prophetic speaking voice and return to places of bondage, declaring freedom to the captives. God is a God of freedom, and he still enters into oppressive systems and brings out the victims of oppression, whom he calls his people. As we go forth, may we let our liberated minds express through our liberated mouths the words that will shake the foundations of tyranny and make right the systems built on the back of human suffering. The black church must maintain its inherited legacy of the Old Testament as a liberating influence with a divine agenda if it is to once again function as a liberating institution within unjust human systems that still seek to enslave.

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