Black, Queer, and Blessed: Toward a Biblically Based Black, Queer Narrative of Leadership

Arthur Leon Tredwell

University of Denver

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Black, Queer, and Blessed:

Toward a Biblically Based Black, Queer Narrative of Leadership

A Dissertation

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Doctor of Philosophy

by

Arthur Leon Tredwell

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Advisor: Dr. Arthur Jones
Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the evolution of traditional African-American religious leadership as it evolved during the first half of the twentieth century. It traces the two primary models of Black religious leadership that emerged from White, cis, benevolent and dominating models of patriarchy. This task is accomplished primarily through a survey of the ministries of Adam Clayton Powell Sr. and Jr. (1908–1970) and their consecutive sixty years of ministry at the Abyssinian Baptist Church, Harlem, New York. It intentionally engages the issue of homophobia, demonstrating how it operates in Black churches generationally.

Determining these historical patriarchal models of leadership to be inadequate, the dissertation proposes a new model of leadership: Black, queer, inspired leadership. It constructs this new model of leadership by identifying six major attributes. These attributes are self-knowledge, discernment, agency, creativity, liminality, and power tempered by compassion. These six attributes surface through a juxtaposition of the leadership qualities of two queer males of African descent, Bayard Rustin of the Civil Rights Movement (1954–1968) and Ebed-Melech, servant to King Zedekiah at the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, two men whose lived experiences are separated by more than twenty-five hundred years. Each man, in his own social orbit, experiences the impact of “othering” in response to his ethnicity and sexual expression.
Both men are Black and queer. Yet, despite the negative hegemonic forces that each encounters, each man attains an undeniably high degree of self-actualization. Given their empowerment, each man moves to exercise his individual agency toward an act of appreciable social change, acts that they determined or felt they were uniquely positioned to fulfill. The biblical exposition of Ebed-Melech, his rescue of the prophet Jeremiah, and his blessing from the divine disrupts the negative biblical stance toward queer people and suggests that, in fact, they are a blessed people. This points us toward a biblically based Black, queer narrative of leadership. It may, at some future point, bring us to a Black, queer theology, but that is not the purpose of this project. Our focus is to disrupt the viability of the two dominating leadership models by proposing a third. To the extent that Western biblical interpretation has prejudicially minimalized the significance of Ebed-Melech’s contributions, this dissertation seeks to serve as a corrective.
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Black, Queer, and Blessed:

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Introduction

The confluence of several cultural beliefs and premises over some four hundred years has given shape to a consciousness we here label “the African American discourse on sexuality.” This discourse surfaces from beliefs that are deeply rooted: having emerged from a lived experience of physical and psychological terror, reinforced by a paradoxical salvific faith that affirms the soul and negates the body, espoused within a vibrant vernacular tradition, and affirmed in an environment of unrealized political liberation. Each stream of thought demands examination if we would more holistically understand the silence of the Historical Black Church (HBC) in failing to speak on issues of sexuality, a silence maintained even facing the threat of death to its primary constituency—African-American females.

Deeply ensconced in this historical silence is a postulate that negates and minimizes the humanity and contributions of those whose sexual practices are identified as outside of its defined sense of heteronormativity. Most overtly, these include the sexual practices of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or sexually queer. This statement demands nuance, as individuals found to have copulated outside of bonds of marriage may also find themselves subject to the HBC’s ill-favor.
This dissertation will first consider the evolution and confluence of these aforementioned beliefs; second, explore a historical theopolitical dynasty that provides us with an understanding of how the false consciousness of homophobia operates among African-American religious leaders; and third, propose a series of life-affirming theopolitical correctives, revealing the normative nature of queerness in the authority of the Civil Rights Movement and the biblical text.

While the history of enslaved Africans does not begin in the United States, the nature of slavery enacted on these shores provides an informative point of initial examination, particularly as it relates to creating and defining Black female and male bodies. Such is the historical context of African Americans living in the United States from 1607 to this present day. America has created, overtly and covertly, a context where Black bodies are devalued on sight! African-American culture, with its ultimate purpose of survival, strains to counter these forces of negativity through distinctive creations that are life-giving, despite the life-threatening contexts. The Black church and the Black preacher are two such distinctive creations.

It then becomes the responsibility of Black preachers, and Black leadership broadly, to draw upon the known history of people of African descent, its wisdom, and its symbols of meaning, with a creative eye, to project and articulate a pathway out of a context of destruction toward a preferred, life-giving future.

**Summarizing Black Heterosexual Love**

With entrance into the twentieth century came a new vision of previously enslaved Africans—the New Negro. During this period, after the First World War (1914–1918), African Americans took on a new image. Previously depicted as Southerners, slow
and hesitant of speech, full of humility and an overt deference for Whites, with the turn of the century, people of African descent living in America began to take on images reflecting pride and dignity. The “New Negro” rejected the prevailing view of racial inferiority, fought back when attacked, and asserted pride in race and Black male humanity.¹

W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Delaney, and Booker Washington, among others, made critical contributions to the construction, description, and perception of this new image. Through joint efforts, political and religious leaders adopted pluralistic notions of Black sexuality as well as conservative sexual mores in order to gain respectability via the gaze of the White dominating class—the narrative of civility. The New Negro is further advanced through geographical and aesthetic repositioning as witnessed by the great northern migration and the Harlem Renaissance. While the Black race was still viewed as the singular Black male, this new self-projected image engaged the adoption of two primary constructs: White respectability and Western patriarchy, both of which dramatically influenced the discourse on Black sexuality.

White respectability may be understood as Black response and resistance to projected images and stereotypes. For example, Black women resisted the image of Jezebel, an image projected by Whites of the deceptive, seductive female, an image derived from the biblical text (1 Kings 13:21). Kelly Brown Douglas outlines two pervasive and intransigent perceptions of Black women: the “Jezebel” and the “Mammy.” She traces the Jezebel image to the initial encounter between European males and African

females. Apparently, the scarcity of clothing worn by African females, while appropriate for their tropical climate, was nevertheless interpreted as a sign of their lewdness and lack of chastity. However, the perceptions and projections became even more pronounced during the period of slavery.

In resistance to this image, Black women dressed more modestly and retreated from overt displays of sexuality, preferring to be treated as “ladies.” Black males adopted Western patriarchal values and, where possible, sought to be the heads of their households. At first glance, this appears to be a complementary move of conformity. However, it too was riddled with difficulty. White respectability shut down any overt discussion of sexuality, as Western patriarchy placed the Black female in subjection to the Black male. Thus dominance, submission, and control became confused with love.

Somewhere between the terror of slavery, filled with relational disruption, feelings of abandonment, and the stereotypical projections of White sexual fear onto Blacks, Black heterosexuality took on a certain distortion as Black males and Black females were thrown into an antagonistic relationship. Given this fragility of Black heteronormativity, how might homosexuality and the plight of Black gays and lesbians be viewed by the Black community and by the HBC? If African American heteronormativity has been undermined by sexual distortion and negative projections, what might we expect


4 Ibid., 158.
to encounter with sexual activities readily labeled as queer, foul, perverted, and religious abominations?

_Homophobia in the Historical Black Church and the Black Community_

While it is unclear as to the precise point when anti-gay sentiments were fused with the biblical text in the worldview of African Americans to produce a rigid anti-gay stance, what is well documented is a nationally published series of sermons preached by Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Sr., pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York, in 1929 at the height of the Harlem Renaissance.\(^5\) This sermon series is important as an example of the kind of message emanating from the pulpits of prominent pastors in the HBC. Powell was one of the most well-known of those pastors.

The Harlem Renaissance, a Black cultural and aesthetic explosion occurring from 1920 to 1935, gave birth to a number of gay African American artists, including Richard Bruce Nugent, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Alain Locke, and others. Horace Griffin, in his article “Toward a True Black Liberation Theology,” notes the Rev. Powell Sr. as having led a vigorous “crusade” against homosexuality and gay people.\(^6\) What is both unfortunate and sad is that his son, Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Jr., some thirty years later would lead a more private “crusade” against Bayard Rustin, an openly gay Black male, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, marginalizing Rustin’s historical contribution.

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\(^{6}\) Ibid.
The sentiments of this father-son pastorate, whose visible influence in religion and politics spans eighty-five years, exemplify the intransigent anti-gay attitude of the majority of African American pastors in the HBC, a majority of whom are mentored into the pastorate without formal theological training.

The first two chapters of this dissertation are historical. In Chapter One I examine the Clayton Powell ministerial dynasty, giving consideration to its innovative theological praxis of social justice and care for the underprivileged, even as it engages in the active dehumanization of gays and lesbians. From my perspective, the depth of this false consciousness and willful dehumanization is most definitively expressed in Clayton Powell Jr.’s political assassination of Bayard Rustin. So then, in Chapter Two, we consider the stature and contributions of Rustin, the man who taught nonviolence to Martin King even as he projected him into national prominence. Rustin is important as an example of a historical figure who exemplifies, at least partially, a bold challenge to prevailing norms of Black masculinity.

Chapters Three and Four are biblical, and here I employ both a Black and a postcolonial hermeneutic. In Chapter Three I turn our attention to an openly queer, African male biblical character who mirrors Rustin in several ways, including also advising a king: Ebed-Melech (Jeremiah 38). This Black queer male has also experienced historical marginalization at the hands of biblical commentators. While his very queerness prohibited him from being able to stand in the assembly of people at the Temple, his actions significantly altered the history of Judaism and, as a result, invoked the voice and blessing of Yahweh (Jeremiah 39).
In Chapter Four I seek to place the exposition of Ebed-Melech in the larger context of the book of Jeremiah, while explaining why the book of Jeremiah has not neatly fit into the “canon within a canon” of the HBC. This is not to suggest that certain passages are not preached from time to time; however, the book does not hold the privileged position of Exodus or Genesis or the Psalms. If we employ Black and postcolonial hermeneutics, we quickly discover a compelling number of parallel social indicators of resistance and the advancement of social change, such as articulate and prophetic leadership under the threat of assassination, the usage of sign acts and demonstrations, and the utilization of laments and spirituals. Additionally, two significant philosophies of survival are publically and privately argued in the texts, historically relevant to African-American peoples: accommodation versus resistance and nationalism versus assimilation.

Chapter Five articulates the major social, political and theological conclusions drawn from this research and my subsequent recommendations to my queer brothers and sisters, African-American pastors, the larger African-American community, and the larger religious community.

**Social Location and Autobiographical Sketch**

Our “family church” is nestled just over the railroad tracks from Huntersville, a relatively small development of single family homes built in the first half of the twentieth century, in Norfolk, Virginia. Mount Olive Baptist Church had been the place of worship for my maternal grandparents: Momma’s people. My maternal grandfather, who owned his own taxicab, was an early Black entrepreneur. My maternal grandmother was a domestic worker. The Wells family, along with Mount Olive Baptist Church, bought into
the narrative of civility in a serious manner. The social location of my grandparents very well might have been designated as somewhere between upper working class and lower middle class, as they owned their own home, transportation, and business—the taxicab. While it was never clearly articulated as such, in retrospective reflection, the norms of White civility loomed large.

My mother believed in the sanctity of marriage and the family. While she had been married several times, which was slightly shameful in that era, nevertheless, she prided herself in never having been “loose” in her morality. She also swore that if my father died, she would find a new husband, indicating her conviction in the appropriateness of the married lifestyle.

My father’s people were not as fortunate. For many years they lived on Cumberland Street—the poorest street in the city of Norfolk. Subsequently, my father’s sisters were “blues women.” They were familiar with poverty, street life, honky-tonks, and survival. They did not have the same commitment to sexual morality of my mother, so, needless to say, there was much friction between the two families, particularly when my married aunt would visit and stay out all night Saturday night, drinking with one of her former boyfriends. Eyes would roll and heads would shake negatively over the seafood platter of fish, crab, shrimp, and grits Momma served for Sunday morning breakfast! But this tension between the “blues lifestyle” and the stride toward civility also played out visibly in the worshiping body of “the family church.”

Mount Olive Baptist is a historically progressive body of African-American worshippers. In its prosperous days, the 1950s and 1960s, it operated a kindergarten for preschool children, of which I was one. Upon completion at age six, we were adorned
with Black graduation gowns and mortarboard caps, clearly a communal projection of initial success pointing toward future graduations. Additionally, Mount Olive might be referred to as “high Baptist.” This designation was a shortcut to saying that our worship leaned toward a White worship style. In other words, our worship style had been coopted by the narrative of civility.

In addition to our pipe organ as the primary musical instrument, our choirs were always robed, summer and winter, and formally processed from the rear of the church, down the center aisle, into the elevated choir stand behind the pulpit. The pulpit was always adorned with two mirroring floral bouquets. On the first Sunday, the entire pulpit was draped in white in honor of communion. Our musical expressions moved from the hymn of the morning to a White-authored choral anthem by the choir, to a reserved gospel song just before the sermon, which would be followed by a hymn of invitation.

Our senior pastor held an earned doctorate of ministry and was viewed as the resident theological scholar. In retrospect, two primary African-American religious expressions, rooted in Africanisms, had been eliminated: the deacons did not conduct devotions prior to the formal opening of worship; and the shout, or what Du Bois calls the “frenzy,” occurred infrequently, and only by a few elder mothers of the church. By 1960, “shouting” had narrowed down to primarily one woman, Sister Walker, and one ten-year-old boy—me!

The elimination of the devotions by the deacons prior to the formal opening of the worship service represented a moving away from the extending prayers of the deacons, the moaning of the pentatonic scale during prayer, and the common meter. The common meter is an African-American historical musical expression, where each line of a hymn is
spoken openly before that stanza is sung by the congregation. Its origin by definition proceeds reading as a commonplace skill among the congregation. To minimize the divisive impact of illiteracy, while elevating the shared commonality, shared plight, the deacon would hold up the hymnbook, and appear to read the lyrics—“A charge to keep I have, a God to glorify.” Once spoken, the congregation begins to sing the articulated stanza; however, they prolong the vowel sound, enhanced by musical riffs, which further distorts the words. This pattern resembles the patois of French colonized Africans or the sound of Gullah language, where the emphasis of speech is altered, rendering the dominating language unrecognizable. I would not hear an authentic performance of the common meter by southern Blacks until I took the northern migration to Chicago in the mid-1960s.

I, like many African-American preachers, was introduced to the biblical text and the accompanying faith of believer as I read passages to my grandmother. In my case, my paternal grandmother was blind. She had suffered a very difficult life and at some point began to lose her sight. When our nuclear family moved from the Huntersville homestead to the suburb of Coronado, my paternal grandmother moved with us. The new house had four bedrooms, so there was room for us all. Mom-Mat and I shared the back bedroom with its half bath. In the fall of 1960, she suffered a stroke and died within a matter of a few days. It was my first encounter with death, and I simply did not know how to feel. Somewhere between her death and my unexpressed gratitude for being adopted, I heard the voice of the Spirit of God speak to me for the first time. That Sunday, I joined Sister Walker in the shout! Therefore, according to Howard Thurman, I am a mystic. For Thurman, the mystic believes s/he has heard the voice of God.
Today, as a mature, openly queer, African American recovering patriarch, with biological children and grandchildren, one whose formal education and lived experience has defined, exemplified, and clarified the paradigm of Western hegemony, I come to this project having loved and served Black churches for more than fifty years. I have served in many capacities, including usher, trustee, deacon, youth minister, associate minister, pastor, administrator, choir director, and musician. Having experienced conversion at an early age, I am steeped in the cultural nuances of Black church culture, worship, and religious expression, from the prayer of faith to the common-meter to glossolalia. In a recent interview, I was asked, “What originally drew you to the Black church?” To my surprise, my reflective response was “survival.” Somehow, at an early age I perceived that Black church offered a certain set of survival skills, perspectives, and ideologies, all of which had the capacity to contribute to safety, wholeness, perseverance, and perhaps longevity. It would take almost a decade beyond my conversion experience before I would also come to see the punitive and destructive idioms operative in the “Old Ship of Zion.” In the process I would eventually become aware of a new role I might play in leading the way to a new, less punitive and more healing set of narratives.

Hermeneutics and Theorists

The Black Hermeneutic

While working on my master of religion and theology degree, I was introduced to the Black and postcolonial hermeneutic. The Black hermeneutic encompasses the theories and methods of biblical interpretation employed initially by enslaved Africans and expanded by the succeeding generations of Black preachers and scholars. Its communal purpose is to extract the meaning that speaks to the social location and lived
reality of Afro-Christian believers. At a more profound level, it also seeks to decenter Western hegemonic biblical interpretation that has historically supported slavery, segregation, colonialism, and patriarchy. As such, Black biblical hermeneutics views liberation as the central reality of the text in contrast to domination.\(^7\)

The Black hermeneutic may have initially emerged from the intuitiveness of Black preachers, both male and female, who “sat where they [enslaved Africans] sat.”\(^8\) It is clear that these biblical pioneers did not “exegete” the texts with the intellectual formality of our day; however, they did seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to impart to them “a word from the Lord.”\(^9\) Henry Mitchell, in his book, *Black Preaching*, reminds us that the distinctive nature of the Black religious experience we know today exists because there was, and to a significant degree remains, a unique Black experience in America.\(^10\) Mitchell insists that this experience was given a religious interpretation by men (and women) who were innocent of the White biblical tradition. Their interpretations emerged from their African background and correspondence with the Bible. They preached as best they were able to understand the book and make sense of their lived experience.\(^11\)

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\(^7\) Stacy Floyd-Thomas et al., *Black Church Studies: An Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 55.


Mitchell argues that the best Black preaching is basically unchanged from the methodologies employed by the earliest Black fathers. This is possible, he states, only because “Black preaching … was not in the mainstream of the changing world of White theology.” Additionally for Mitchell, Black preaching has survived basically unchanged, in its isolation, because it uniquely speaks to the needs of Black people.

Another component of the Black hermeneutic and Black biblical studies is the exploration and identification of Black presence in the Bible. This approach provides a connection with biblical stories that is not only an intense sociopolitical connection but also a direct racial connection. The identification of a historical presence of Black people in the Bible begins in the nineteenth century with Black preachers such as J. W. C Pennington and Henry Highland Garnett and continues in the twentieth century with scholars such as Charles Copher, Renita Weems, and Cain Hope Felder. Through a variety of academic approaches, these scholars have demonstrated a strong Black presence in the Bible. Beyond the initial focus on discrete Black individuals such as Zipporah, Moses’ Cushite wife, and Ebed-Melech, the court official who rescued Jeremiah from the point of death, subsequent scholarship has progressed to demonstrate that the contexts and cultures of the biblical world were located on the continent of Africa.

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12 Ibid., 27.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 28.
15 Floyd-Thomas et al., Black Church Studies, 59.
and significantly influenced by an African consciousness. So the primary assertion of Black biblical hermeneutic in the current century is not only the presence of Black people in the Bible but also that the corpus itself is set in an African context, both geographically and culturally. If we flip the script, the real question to ask is “Who are the ‘White’ people of the biblical text?”

**Postcolonial Hermeneutic**

Theorists who have influenced this project begin with R. S. Sugirtharajah, who engages the intersection between postcolonial thought and the biblical text. He examines strategies employed by the colonizer and its dominating hegemony as it structures images of the colonized. Still others to be included are W. E. B. Du Bois, for his work on double-consciousness, along with Jacques Lacan and his contribution of the gaze.

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16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 60.
Chapter 1:

Of the Adam Clayton Powell Dynasty and Homophobia in High Places

_You come all the way with me ... don't leave me now._
—Traditional

This chapter explores the sociopolitical context of Harlem, New York, beginning with the call of Adam Clayton Powell Sr. to the pulpit of Abyssinian Baptist Church at the turn of the twentieth century. Harlem was one of the prime destinations for southern Blacks participating in the Northern Migration. While not yet as violent as the South, this context still allowed Black males to be accosted on these streets—physically and psychologically—without regard to their status; it did not matter if they held positions of respect within the Black community. However, this context did present a new opportunity for voices previously silenced to be heard—voices of the Black upper class; voices of Black women; voices of Black, queer men and women; voices of musicians, poets, novelists, and playwrights—a multiplicity of voices, producing a liberative cacophony. But who are the primary leaders, capable of being heard above the masses, and whose voices do they value, and which voices do they deem unessential?

The existential challenges facing African-American people, and their unique and creative responses, can be accurately understood only in light of the elongated trauma of their lived experiences upon these shores. Before the Three-Fifths Compromise that provided a constitutional definition of their personage, decades of arbitrary lynching and burnings encompassed a disproportionate number of murdered young Black males and
females by “peace officers.” The journey of this people can be characterized only as a prolonged trauma.

Their first challenge is to forge a communal consciousness. Their second is to deconstruct, accurately, their sociopolitical reality. Their third challenge is to synthesize the tensions emerging between a disembodied puritanical Protestant theology to which they were initially introduced and the stark realities plainly articulated in their secular vernaculars: folk stories, poetry, and musical genres such as jazz and the blues. While the Historical Black Church has existed informally for more than four hundred years, originating in hush harbors and late night religious gatherings, its institutional history can be traced to founding the Silver Bluff (South Carolina) Baptist Church in 1773 or the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in New York in 1801. It is this institution, the historical center of the African American community, that contributes to the African-American consciousness. It seeks to provide a coherent, relevant worldview of Black existence in this world even as it projects a righteous-divine corrective to all injustices in the world to come.

One theocultural creation of resistance by this people is the Black preacher. The Black preacher in turn gave us the Black hermeneutic and the sermonic art form of Black preaching that weekly infuses, enlivens, and expands the African-American consciousness.\(^\text{18}\) To this end, the Black church continues to evolve not only as a unique place where truth is articulated and marginalized worldviews are affirmed but also as a place of

patriarchal dominance where the Black male image is honored and respected. The Historic Black Church is one of the first institutions completely devoted to support, develop, and honor the Black male. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear that this affirmation is not afforded to all Black males, but is in fact a nurturance reserved for masculine cis-gendered Black males. All other Black males presenting a divergent expression of masculinity are essentialized as queer and are consequently dishonored. Adam Clayton Powell Sr. and Jr., Black males of substantive intellect and liminality, happened to fall into the gender-privileged category through no efforts of their own. They chose to use their influence to further dishonor queer Black males and females. For the purpose of this dissertation, “queer” is used as an inclusive term for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered persons. It includes all persons whose sexual expressions are outside the general Western construct of heterosexual normativity.

**Dynastic Overview**

The ministry of Adam Clayton Powell Sr. (1865–1953) and his son, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. (1908–1972), encompassed the restrictive Supreme Court decisions of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and the expansive pronouncements of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and included the Civil Rights Movement of 1950–1968. This dynamic and prophetic ministry provided profound leadership in eras of unprecedented social, political, and religious evolution within the African-American experience and the history of the United States. Powell Sr. preached and ministered during the Reconstruction, Post-Reconstruction, the Northern Migration, World War I, the Great Migration, the Harlem Renaissance, the Stock Market Crash of 1929, and the resulting Great Depression. In complete exhaustion in 1937, Powell Sr. yielded the religious dynasty to his son Adam,
who would transform the Abyssinian Baptist Church from a “class church” to a “mass church” over the next three decades.

For the purposes of this discussion, New York City and Harlem in particular figure centrally. New York, the birthplace of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, is where the Powells pastored consecutively for more than sixty years. Furthermore, after the Emancipation, New York served as a primary destination for southern Black migrants seeking to escape the constitutional affirmation of segregation established in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). Additionally, New York was the seedbed of the Harlem Renaissance, an unprecedented outpouring of Black arts, dance, literature, and music. The Powell dynasty provided visionary leadership as leading voices and institutional developers in the theosociopolitical context of their times. The utilization of the “theosociopolitical” label for their context is to suggest that the Powells and their constituent community felt led of God to engage in certain social and political actions. Or to restate: their social and political actions were aligned with the agenda of the divine—the Master Planner.

**Biographical Sketch of Adam Clayton Powell Sr.**

In December 1908, Adam Clayton Powell Sr. accepted the pastorate of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City. Powell Sr. was forty-three years old, Abyssinian was one hundred years old, and Powell Jr. was just a month old. The church had seven hundred sixty-two members and was raising less than three thousand dollars annually. Every property the church owned was mortgaged to the hilt, and the church’s bank account was significantly overdrawn. Powell Sr. would, however, creatively and effectively pastor this congregation for the next twenty-nine years, through Post-
Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow, the era of the New Negro, the Northern Migration, World War I, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Great Depression.  

As he was fond of saying, Powell Sr. was born May 5, 1865, “near Martin Mill at the conflux of Maggoty and Soak Creeks in Franklin County, Virginia.” His mother, Sallie Dunning, was an eighteen-year-old enslaved woman of mixed heritage. His father, Llewellyn H. Powell, a substantial property owner, was of German ancestry and was described as handsome and brilliant. From all evidence, it appears that Powell Sr. inherited his father’s genius. At the age of seven, Powell Sr. began his educational process. Within a few days of classwork, his keen mind was evident. As McNeil notes, Powell Sr.’s ability to read the newspaper eventually helped the family to avoid the death trap of sharecropping.

Powell Sr.’s conversion and initial religious experiences coincided with a time of new religious denominations. Holiness and sanctification were emerging as the primary theological planks of the Church of Christ (Holiness) (1896) and the Church of God in Christ (1895). These denominations were rooted in puritanical Protestantism and emphasized abstinence relative to the drinking of alcohol, drew a distinction between sacred and sinful music and dance, and refrained from the use of profane language. Advancing the most proscriptive limitations upon female bodies, women were


20 Ibid., 78–81.
encouraged to dress modestly and refrain from wearing makeup. As will be demonstrated, Powell Sr., though Baptist, adopted a strict sense of morality and civility.

Powell Sr. matriculated at Wayland Seminary (then located in Washington, D.C.), which would become Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia. Powell Sr. met one of his most influential mentors, Dr. George Merrill Prentice King, at Wayland. Powell Sr. finished his degree in 1892 and became one of only one thousand, one hundred twenty-six Black persons in the nation to have received a college degree. In 1895, he became a special student at Yale Divinity School. Powell Sr. participated in classes as part of a non-degree-granting program. Working closely with Professor Samuel Harris, Powell Sr. studied Martin Luther’s idea of each Christian being his own biblical interpreter. Under Harris’s tutelage, Powell Sr. came to believe that everyone who comes to faith through Jesus Christ can learn Scriptures and teach them accurately.

While still in Wayland Seminary, Powell Sr. married Mattie Fletcher Shaffer, his adolescent sweetheart, and in 1893 they began their lifelong ministry. It was during this period, 1893–1908, that Powell Sr. served as senior pastor at Immanuel Baptist Church in New Haven, Connecticut. Many years later, the Abyssinian Baptist Church wrote a summation of Powell Sr.’s life, saying,

Adam Clayton Powell Sr. chose not to live his life as if constricted or constrained by his race or religion. A holistic approach to his career and his confidence were rooted in essential beliefs about God, faith, liberation, and power. “Faith in God and his son, Jesus Christ, bring … us into vital contact with the source of power. … Faith is the medium through which we get power to live, work, and accomplish

21 Painter, Creating Black Americans, 156.

22 McNeil et al, Witness, 86.
what seems humanly impossible. … “[God] is able to do exceeding abundantly above all we ask or think according to the power that worketh in us”’ (Eph. 3:20-21).  

This summation of Powell Sr.’s life provides us with some noteworthy considerations, given the fact that this congregation observed his character and leadership in a multiplicity of difficult situations and challenges, both professional and personal. To open its summation by stating that he “chose not to live his life as if constricted or constrained by his race or religion” points to a critical characteristic of inspired leadership: an internalized self-knowledge and self-conceptualization that provided Powell Sr. with a capacity to transcend the dominating hegemonic discourse of race and religion projected on him as a Black male. Clearly, this noteworthy quality is essential to aggressive and progressive leadership in any context and one that we will explore more fully.

_Toward a Contextual Overview of Powell Sr.’s Times_

Among the historical archives of the Abyssinian Baptist Church is a letter marked “Personal” and dated March 1, 1911, written by Adam Clayton Powell Sr. to Dr. Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee Institute. Powell Sr. began the letter by apologizing for having not responded to previous correspondence received from Washington a few weeks prior. Powell Sr. noted that he had been ill for the prior six weeks and confined to bed.

The content of the letter centered on conversations Powell Sr. held in New York among other clergy, many of whom were critics of Washington’s approach to advancing

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23 Ibid., 87.
the race. Powell Sr. admitted that for ten years he was identified with a group of thinkers known as “radical Negroes.” He went on to confess that he was no longer a part of that group because radicalism had not accomplished anything good, and he acknowledged that the greater purpose of the group was not as much to destroy racial prejudice as it was to attempt to discredit Washington and his policies for racial advancement. Powell Sr. concluded the letter by saying that he openly defends Washington’s policies in the New York community, not that these policies need defense, but rather, he defends them because they represent the only theory that has advanced the race since the Emancipation. Furthermore, being honest to his convictions, Powell Sr. viewed it as essential to advise his people to follow Washington’s program of industry, education, and accumulation of wealth and property.

Later that same month, Washington visited New York City and experienced a regrettable encounter that illustrates the lack of safety afforded Black males in the city. The Chicago Defender records this incident, which did not immediately appear in the New York newspapers. Around March 18, 1911, Washington was the victim of an altercation on the streets of New York City. The Chicago Defender article was titled “B. T. Washington Beaten on New York Streets Like Dog.”

24 “B. T. Washington Beaten on New York Streets Like a Dog,” Chicago Defender (March 25, 1911).
Apparently, Washington was visiting an apartment building on West Sixty-Third Street as part of his fundraising effort that was central to his visit to the city.\textsuperscript{25} While the circumstances surrounding the incident lack clarity and are difficult to understand, the \textit{Chicago Defender} article stated that a White woman screamed, saying that Washington had called her “sweetheart.” The woman, hailing from Georgia, perhaps understood the impact of her scream and the potential outcome. The New York police, who happened to be predominantly Irishmen, were called to the scene. They subsequently beat Washington over the head until he was weak from blood loss. They then accused him of being drunk as he staggered away.\textsuperscript{26}

The \textit{Chicago Defender} article goes on to suggest that New York City in 1911 was as negative a context for Negroes as any city in the South. The article says,

\begin{quote}
New Orleans or some Georgia cities excel New York only by a half degree and a half only. There are always riots and killings of Negroes there every day in the year and it will continue to be so as long as the arm of the law continues to wink at the Americans and foreigners who perform these crimes.
\end{quote}

Furthermore, the article called for the hiring of colored policemen, suggesting that Chicago at an earlier time was equally as hostile. Evidently in Chicago at that time a Negro could not go on the north or west side of the city without being chased back. After the hiring of Negro policemen and the opening of public schools to Negro children, however, these attacks are said to have ceased. Chicago was extolled as standing alone in

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\textsuperscript{25} In order to maintain Tuskegee Institute, Washington had the task of raising the sum of one hundred fifty thousand dollars per year, which he obviously had been successful in achieving.

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Chicago Defender} (March 25, 1911).
\end{flushright}
the order of fair treatment to the colored man. The article concluded by noting a number of letters and flowers of condolence were sent to Washington from members of the Hampton-Tuskegee Club, as well as the Queen of Belgium, President William Taft, and the *Chicago Defender*.²⁷

It is general knowledge that two major African American scholars dominated the American sociopolitical scene at the turn of the twentieth century: Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. This letter to Washington reflects a personal relationship with Powell. But more importantly, it reflects the context of the period, suggesting that no Black male, regardless of accomplishment, was free from the threat and actuality of police brutality. The failure of the New York newspapers to report the story exemplifies the complicity of media in shielding a true reflection of the societal context, dissuading Whites of the presence of injustice and ignoring the injustice perpetrated toward Blacks.

Despite northern injustice, southern injustice had been and continued to be much worse, fueling the migration of blacks to the North, and in some instances providing new congregants to churches like the Abyssinian Baptist Church.

**Black Bodies, Male and Female Sites for Violence and Terror**

M. Shawn Copeland, in her article “Body, Representation, and Black Religious Discourse,” informs us that the Black female body, since its arrival upon these shores, has been a site of great disputation.²⁸ Copeland identifies Black females as peculiar

²⁷ Ibid.

objects of desire, property, release, all placed at the economic and erotic disposal of White (European and American) males and females.  

Copeland notes that this “colonization” of Black women’s bodies began in slavery, and she details three instances of dehumanizing sexual assault. Copeland first tells the story of a slave woman who refused the advances of her overseer. As punishment, the enslaved woman received a severe beating, with her arms tied over her head while standing on a block. When the block was eventually removed, the woman, dangling in midair, was beaten until blood ran down her back to her heels. Copeland then recounts an incident when the White mistress of the house was gone for the day. Her three sons, seventeen, nineteen, and twenty-one, pinned the Black female domestic servant to the floor and repeatedly raped her for the duration of the afternoon. Finally, Copeland describes the liberty afforded to masters and overseers to take women working in the fields into the woods and rape them at will, after which the women were sent back to the fields to work.

The larger point, given these testimonies from slave narratives, is to emphasize the torment and abuse Black women suffered, bodily, sexually, and psychologically, as objects of property and desire. Other womanist theologians point out that these assaults were rooted in an ideology that can be traced to the earliest encounters between

29 Ibid., 181
30 Ibid., 183
Europeans and Africans. To a significant degree, these attitudes and behaviors are rooted in patriarchy and reflect how White men viewed women in general.\textsuperscript{31}

Kelly Brown Douglas, in \textit{Sexuality and the Black Church}, lifts up Sarah Bartmann as an exemplification of the White cultural attack on Black women and men. What is critical to draw from this illustration is that Bartmann and her bodily parts served as the central Western image of the Black female throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{32}

Dwight Hopkins, in his article “The Construction of the Black Male Body,” views the social, political, and cultural positioning of the Black male body as one participant in what he calls the “Triangle of Desire.”\textsuperscript{33} This “triangle” comprises the Black male body, the White male body, and competition for any female body, the most prized of which is the blond, blue-eyed, White female. Hopkins attempts to demonstrate the operative, prevailing image of the Black male body as both criminal and beastly.

Tracing this construction to Descartes and his works \textit{Discourse on Method} (1637) and \textit{Meditations} (1641), Hopkins, expanding this thought process, suggests that the mind is the higher order and can affect the body. The body then is an object to be governed by the mind. In this construct the mind supersedes the body in value and, being regarded as inferior, the body must be governed and controlled by the mind. The White mind is pure

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\textsuperscript{31} Douglas, \textit{Sexuality and the Black Church}, 33.
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\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 33–34.
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intellect and capable of decision-making. The Black body, according to Hopkins, is deficient by nature and creation; it lacks power to think and thrives on raw, animal eroticism.\footnote{Ibid., 182–184.}

Hopkins notes the prevalence of Descartes’ ideas among African-American Christians and within the theological underpinning of the HBC. As a result, he argues, the erotic is seldom mentioned. Simultaneously, the African-American Christian sexual discourse is reduced to a series of prohibitions: “don’t have sex before marriage, don’t cheat on one’s wife, don’t have homosexual sex.” A primary tenet of the Black theology of the HBC has transposed Descartes’ thinking into a body and soul split. However, there is a secondary consideration as well. It is an operative segregation also at work, where the body and soul in worship reside in one place and the body and soul in sexual invigoration reside somewhere else!\footnote{Ibid., 185.} As we shall see, Hopkins might well have been describing the messages that were prominent in many of Powell Sr.’s sermons.

**Tensions of Migration**

*The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* identifies the Northern Migration as a contributing factor to the Harlem Renaissance. It notes that New York was one of the most powerful “magnets” for thousands of Blacks fleeing the South following the Supreme Court endorsement of segregation in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896).\footnote{Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Mellie Y. McKay, eds., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 930. From}
1889 to 1899, one thousand two hundred forty Black men and women were lynched, primarily in the South.\textsuperscript{37}

Kelly Brown Douglas provides a deeper insight into the conflicts emerging during the initial waves of the great migrations. She indicates that, in the decade of the 1920s, more than two million Black people moved to the North. As a result of this tremendous influx, Douglas argues, a cultural clash emerged between new Black arrivals from the South and those residents who had been in the North for some time and had settled into the norms of northern Black society. Douglas argues that this clash was initially perceived as cultural, yet it could also be understood as a significant class conflict.\textsuperscript{38}

Several wealthy northern Black families had lived comfortably in New York for decades before the Northern Migration began.\textsuperscript{39} Members of this echelon of the Black community prided themselves on their refinement and respectability as individuals and families. This self-perception was heightened among the professional class. Douglas argues that the new migrants from the South were regarded with considerably less esteem, as many of the stereotypes that we have already discussed were projected onto them. They were considered to be lacking in every area of importance, from education to morality. From the perspective of Douglas, the Black elite felt that not only was the prevailing image of Black people at risk of being tarnished but also their own image and

\textsuperscript{37} Raboteau, \textit{Fire in the Bones}, 37.


all the investments they had made to ensure the viability of their place in society. To combat this perception, northern Black residents and their leadership adopted a “narrative of civility” within the Black community.\textsuperscript{40}

Douglas notes that northern Black residents developed training classes and etiquette clubs and created manuals and booklets designed to acculturate southern Black arrivals to normative northern residency. This narrative of civility, a corrective reaction to the White perception of Black persons, was rooted in White puritanical standards of appropriate behavior.\textsuperscript{41} Northern Black residents held little confidence in the refinement of the White perception to differentiate between the face of established northern Black residents versus the newer southern Black arrivals. Douglas goes on to suggest that, if this distinction were lost, northern Black elites feared that the presence of the new arrivals would undermine all of the strides they had accomplished toward acceptance and assimilation into mainstream society. Implicit in this perspective is a knowledge and fear of the arbitrary nature of White privilege—a socially accepted privilege to invoke the arbitrary killing of Blacks, with or without cause. The White privilege perspective highlights the irrationality that is inherent in racism.

In this era, and with this consciousness, it was believed that the successful acculturation of the new arrivals would demonstrate that all Black people were as civilized as White people. The burden of this effort, however, was disproportionately placed on the backs of Black women. The “uplift” ideology, however, was not a new

\textsuperscript{40} Douglas, \textit{Black Bodies}, 33-34.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 34.
conclusion or reaction to the White perception. The grounding and foresight for this way of thinking had already been advanced almost twenty years earlier.

Douglas’ analysis is directly relevant to our understanding of the kinds of messages promulgated from the pulpit by prominent pastors like Adam Clayton Powell Sr., who bought into both the narrative of civility and the promotion of “uplifting” the Black race.

Consider, for example, Powell Sr.’s sermon, “The Molding Influence of Women,” delivered more than twenty times across northern cities during this era. The text of the sermon is taken from Jer. 31:22, “How long wilt thou go about, O thou backsliding daughter? For the LORD hath created a new thing in the earth: a woman shall compass a man.” Powell Sr. opened the sermon by suggesting that there is equipoise between man and woman, exegeting the word “compass” with an original meaning of stepping together. He then disrupted this equipoise by suggesting that woman lost this position of equality by transgressing the law and influencing her husband into disobedience in the Garden of Eden: “[Because thou hast done this,] thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” (Gen. 3:16).

Powell Sr. goes on to state that this equipoise was restored when “all that was lost by her disobedience in Eden was regained in the anguish of motherhood at Bethlehem.” He described women as “the material masterpiece of God’s creative genius, the mother of our nations and the queen of our homes.” He noted that “no race can rise higher than its homes and no home can rise higher than its mother.” Furthermore, as the husband is
away all day at work and away all night at the lodge or club, the home is therefore under the molding influence of the mother.\textsuperscript{42}

Powell Sr. argued further that, from whatever point you view a woman, she is the most influential being in the world. She is the one who can lead man to the highest pinnacle of purity, nobility, and usefulness, or to the lowest steps of shame and infamy. Powell Sr. places women behind the fall of Adam, the first man. She was also behind the fall of Sampson, the strongest man, and behind the fall of Solomon, the wisest man. From Powell Sr.’s vantage point, the destiny of any race of men is in the hands of that race’s women.\textsuperscript{43} Powell Sr. concluded his message by noting the role of women in the ministry of Christ, as well as their presence at his crucifixion, acknowledging that women were the last at the cross and the first at the grave.

It should be observed that Powell Sr.’s argument is inconsistent with the lives of many of his parishioners. Most Black females worked outside their households in this era, as there were very few jobs available to Black males.\textsuperscript{44} These factors strongly contradict Powell Sr.’s vision of the Black family. Additionally, there were other, more pervasive cultural and societal challenges to this narrative of civility—challenges with contradicting and compelling images within and outside of the Black community. Most

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\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 177.
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\textsuperscript{44} Douglas, \textit{Black Bodies}, 38.
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threatening to them all were the “women of the blues,” an emerging counter-image that challenged the pious image of female civility.

After the turn of the twentieth century, the Urban League and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) adopted this uplift narrative in their efforts to improve the image of Black people and to influence the perception of White society. Powell Sr., always relevant in his preaching and teaching, addressed this issue in an afternoon speech to the Abyssinian Baptist Church congregation on July 1, 1917. In his speech, “The Attitude of the Negro Church Toward Southern Migration,” Powell Sr. reflected upon the personal contributions of southern Blacks and their institutions. He noted that he was educated in the South and had served primarily southern migrants in the North for twenty-five years. Having recently traveled through the southern and western states, he commented that around three hundred fifty thousand Blacks had migrated in the past year. Powell Sr. also described this repositioning in financial terms and estimated the economic loss in labor to the South to be in excess of two hundred million dollars.46

Powell Sr. identified this migration as a leaderless movement—no single person was advocating and provoking this transition. From Powell Sr.’s perspective, “The colored people have become disgusted with the leadership of ‘cornstalk’ preachers, weak-kneed professors, and spineless politicians.” Powell Sr. pointed out that people were

45 Ibid., 36.

46 Adam Clayton Powell Sr., “The Attitude of the Negro Church Toward Southern Migration” (sermon, Abyssinian Baptist Church, July 1, 1917).
leaving and not saying goodbye, not even to their pastors. Providing a vivid example, Powell noted that a colored preacher went out to visit a family on his regular pastoral call, only to find that thirty families in his parish had vacated their homes, leaving furniture and cooking utensils behind.

Showing some appreciation for the economic implications of this migration, Powell Sr. pressed to the greater cause of the movement—inhumane treatment. Powell Sr. pointed out that the “migratory thousands” were not (only or primarily) seeking money, but rather fair and just treatment. For Powell Sr., Blacks were just tired. They were tired of being kept out of public libraries and parks, tired of being deprived of educational advancement, and tired of signs saying, “Negroes and dogs not admitted.” The larger issue, however, that Powell Sr. pointed to is lynching. He says, “The whole race is sick of seeing unmasked mobs in broad daylight mutilate and burn unconvicted colored men, throwing the amputated pieces of their bodies around the streets to intimidate and humiliate respectable members of the race.”

Important to the central issues we are exploring in this chapter is the fact that, despite his apparent acknowledgment of the economic plight of many of his congregants, Powell resorts to an argument for social uplift as a solution to these painful experiences. This of course means, at least in part, assimilation to dominant cultural norms. His proposed solution inadvertently denies the reality of the lived experience of poverty, As we shall see as we examine the work of Bayard Rustin in the next chapter, a more clear-sighted analysis deals squarely and realistically with both cultural and economic issues and disconnects them from a primary focus on cultural uplift.
New York and Harlem: Blackness and Class

Gates and McKay provide additional insight into our understanding of New York and Harlem as “magnets.” Fully acknowledging that Blacks settled in several northern cities, including Chicago, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and New York, they were deemed the “destinations of choice.” From a substantive point of view, Harlem was a real point of attraction in that its housing had been built for middle-class and upper-middle-class Whites. The district had been significantly overbuilt, however, creating a situation of economic hardship for real-estate interests. Blacks and Whites conspired together to break exclusionary practices that had previously kept Blacks out. Migrants and newcomers found a district filled with grand avenues, broad sidewalks, and finely constructed housing stock that was superior to anything available elsewhere in the nation. James Weldon Johnson dubbed Harlem “the Negro capital of the world.”

The viability and potential of this district did not escape the vision and discernment of Powell Sr. Following the Red Summer of 1919, a period described as the greatest period of racial strife ever witnessed by the United States, Powell Sr. urged Blacks and members of the Abyssinian Baptist Church to look to themselves to secure their living conditions. He subsequently advanced his vision to move the church from its location in Manhattan to Harlem, Johnson’s “Negro capital of the world.”

Powell envisioned not only a new church but also a community center that would be an asset to Black migrants. To this end, the Abyssinian Baptist Church acquired

47 Gates and McKay, Norton Anthology, 930.

several lots on West 138th Street. What began as an enthusiastic endeavor in 1919, however, lost much momentum by the winter of 1921. Powell Sr. had warned the church that, should they fail to sustain and achieve this building project, he would resign. Given the congregation’s apathy and indifference, on the second Sunday of December, 1921, Powell Sr., without anyone’s knowledge except his secretary who typed his communications, had his resignation read before the congregation. The church was shocked! Powell Sr. offered a brief and pointed letter of resignation saying, “I am leaving your church to devote myself to evangelistic campaigns … because you do not believe in progressive and aggressive leadership.”

His resignation was summarily rejected, initiating a congregational reversal of attitude and commitment. By May 1923, Harlem’s skyline had been dramatically altered with two new buildings: the Abyssinian Baptist Church and its community house. Total construction cost less than three hundred thirty-four thousand dollars and carried an unpaid mortgage of sixty thousand dollars, which would be retired by 1928. In today’s economy, this project would be the equivalent to four million five hundred sixty-six thousand dollars.

Blues Women

Blues women must never have heard Powell Sr.’s sermon on the “Molding Influence of Women.” Or, to restate, they certainly had heard it, or a sermon like it, but they paid it no mind. With forthright consciousness, blues women like Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Alberta Hunter were realists and utilized their self-knowledge, discernment,

49 Ibid., 118.
creativity, and liminality to empower themselves. As Douglas has indicated, they expressed no desire to be domesticated bodies or bodies under the control of others. They sang with such integrity and authenticity that their music spoke to Black women from both the North and the South.\textsuperscript{50} With intensity equal to, or perhaps even greater than, the narrative of civility, blues women reflected the truth of the Black female existence, particularly those elements that directly contradicted the narrative of civility. The power of these contradicting images was substantive and authentic and represented a significant challenge to the directives of the Black church. Douglas goes on to suggest that blues women redefined what was possible for Black females beyond domestic work, meager earnings, living in domesticated households, and being defined and controlled in the post-Emancipation era.

The prevailing image of the Black female at this time was that of a domestic worker. Black females were generally employed as domestic workers in White family households. Douglas points out that the image was so pervasive that even Bessie Smith was listed as a domestic worker on her death certificate.\textsuperscript{51} Yet nothing could have been further from the truth. Smith’s job was singing the blues. In doing so she provided an alternative occupation for Black females to consider, an occupation that, even on a local level, paid considerably more than domestic work. On average, a local blues singer earned, on any given night, five times as much as a domestic worker earned in a forty-

\textsuperscript{50} Douglas, \textit{Black Bodies}, 37.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 43.
In fact, Smith’s initial recording of “Down-Hearted Blues” and “Gulf Coast Blues” sold seven hundred eighty thousand copies in six months. While Bessie’s total earnings are not known, given her various contracts and performances, she was wealthy enough to have owned a personal railroad car, and she was noted for carrying thousands of dollars on her person.

As to the image of the domesticated housewife, Alberta Hunter told her husband that she could make more money than he could ever give her. Furthermore, she explained that she simply was not cut out to be a housewife. So, representing the Black female body as a traveling body as well, she returned to singing the blues and became noted for the song, “I Got a Mind to Ramble.”

This was hardly the narrative of civility promulgated by pastors like Powell Sr. Blues women were, through their work, constructing a different narrative about the possibility of Black existence, particularly Black female existence. Like the kind of queer wisdom we will explore next as well as in Chapter Two, blues women were ahead of their time in the wisdom they exemplified. Sadly that wisdom was unacknowledged.

The Homosexual Blues

At the same time, there is an emergence of the Harlem Renaissance with its significant queer constituency. The renaissance can be dated from roughly 1920 to 1935.

52 Ibid., 39.


54 Douglas, Black Bodies, 44.
As a direct result of the Northern Migration in New York, particularly in Harlem, Black lesbians and gays met each other on street corners, socialized in cabarets, and collaborated in houses of worship. Queer Blacks are a diverse group of people and cannot be labeled as monolithic. Gender expressions varied, with some people more discreet regarding their sexual identities even as others expressed themselves openly.

A frequent occurrence seems to be that where there is a Black man, there also will be a White male gaze. The larger point is that the gathering of Black males attracted White males, which in turn created friendships among people of very different backgrounds, providing the opportunity for building alliances for progressive social change.

Another contributing factor to the increased racial presence of Blacks was World War I. It led to an increase in industrial production, while simultaneously ending immigration, resulting in thousands of job opportunities in northern factories, jobs that Blacks could fill. It was this migration that produced substantive Black communities in Harlem, Chicago, Detroit, and even Buffalo. But for all of these locations, Harlem was the mecca. Blacks called themselves “New Negroes.” Harlem was their capital, and they adopted a new brand of militancy accompanied with deep racial pride. It was not beyond the experience of Black servicemen to receive a degree of respect while serving in


56 Ibid., 318–319.
Europe during the war. No doubt this experience heightened awareness in regard to their expectations when they returned home.

In this era, Harlem reflected a diversity of sociopolitical thought clearly demonstrated in the competing leaderships of Marcus Garvey and his “Back to Africa Movement,” W. E. B. Du Bois’s National Association of Colored People, and Charles Johnson’s National Urban League. Each articulated a resolve to the nation’s racial inequality but prioritized different strategies and approaches.

Harlem soon became the center for the blues, jazz, and fine art. The well-known contributors included Fletcher Henderson, Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Bessie Smith, Alberta Hunter, and Ethel Waters. These contributors held up the musical front, while the likes of Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Zora Hurston emerged in published works and local newspapers. It was the blues, however, that captured the sentiment, sensibilities, and nuances of queer people. Blame it on the blues!

Homosexuality, gayness, and queerness held a strategic position in this community. Bessie Smith crooned in these words, “There’s two things got me puzzled, there’s two things I don’t understand, that’s a mannish-acting woman and a lisping, swishing, woman-ish acting man.” What baffled Ma Rainey was her husband’s infidelity with a homosexual named “Miss Kate.” While Black gays and lesbians developed a viable social networking system, it was still dangerous to be queer in this era. Queer people were constantly under attack from the police and the judicial system. For example, in 1928, Augustus Granville Dill, a distinguished businessman and business editor of The

57 Ibid., 319.
Crisis, suffered the destruction of his career when he was arrested for soliciting sex in a public restroom.\textsuperscript{58} Dill was the protégé of W. E. B. Du Bois, and The Crisis was the magazine of the NAACP.

Gays and lesbians met in various settings, some safer than others. There were “rent parties,” a survival technique brought north in the great migration. Money was extremely tight, and sometimes rent money was difficult to accumulate. To raise funds, people would throw large parties, inviting the public and charging admission. There would be dancing and music and bootleg liquor and food for sale. There were scores of these parties on any given Saturday night throughout Harlem. It was not unusual for these parties to last until dawn. By morning, the rent usually had been secured.\textsuperscript{59}

Also, there were “buffet flats.” These were after-hour spots, usually in someone’s apartment. Generally, they were private apartments where rooms could be rented by the night. Buffet flats emerged during the late 1800s to provide overnight accommodations to Black travelers. By the 1920s, however, these flats had developed a wilder reputation. Some were places of ill repute, where illegal activities such as drinking, gambling, and prostitution were available. Others offered cafeteria-style sexual pleasures.\textsuperscript{60}

The most opulent parties with a queer ambiance were hosted by A’Lelia Walker. Walker was the only daughter of Madam C. J. Walker, a former washwoman who became a millionaire through marketing her hair-straightening process. Walker was the

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 320–321.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 321.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 322.
primary heir to her mother’s fortune. Madame Walker had been a civic-minded philanthropist, donating thousands of dollars to charitable causes. Walker, however, enjoyed much of her inheritance by throwing lavish parties in her Hudson River estate. The city’s most elite and elegant homosexuals, both Black and White, were among her closest friends.61

As one can forthrightly conclude, between the blues women and the queers, the narrative of civility had its work cut out! A sense of moral panic reached Powell Sr., senior pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church. On November 10, 1929, he preached a sermon denouncing degeneracy and sexual perversion.

This sermon, delivered twelve days after the crash of the stock market in New York, had a main theme centered on the prevalence of sexual perversion and moral degeneracy, which Powell Sr. noted as being on the increase, particularly in large cities in the United States. He noted that this degeneracy was to be found not only among men and women of prominence in the secular world, both White and Black, but also among many who filled the pulpits. Powell Sr. cited a Japanese proverb, stating that when a fish begins to stink, it starts at the head. Noting that there were a vast number of stinking preachers in American pulpits, starting with the Methodists and moving to the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Powell Sr. identified preachers by name, condemning them for the crimes they had been publically convicted of or charged with.

In his sermon, Powell Sr. vilified gays by making no distinction between pedophilia and homosexuality, noting that several pastors had been tried on charges of

61 Ibid.
depravity as it related to sexual encounters between pastors and the young boys of their churches. Powell Sr. noted that one church “whitewashed and retained as pastor a minister who had been charged by five boys in sworn affidavits with wrecking them morally.” Powell Sr. went on to state that homosexuality and sexual perversion among women had grown into one of the most horrible, debasing, alarming, and damning vices of present-day civilization. He further asserted that not only is it prevalent to an astonishing degree but also, from his perspective, is increasing day by day.

Having denounced the pulpit sufficiently, Powell Sr. turned from the pulpit to the pew, declaring that the only reason these degenerate preachers are kept in the pulpit is that the church allows it. He asserted that the only reason churches keep rotten ministers is because churches themselves are ruined. In the corruption of the pew, there is an ever-present tendency to pull down or kick out good ministers. Powell Sr. then threw down the gauntlet, declaring that he has lived a straight and clean life in the twenty-one years of his pastorate at Abyssinian Baptist Church. Furthermore, he declared that if anyone sought to bring charges of illicit behavior against him, he would personally provide a church meeting for such a discussion. The church members’ general consensus of his comments was that it was a bold defiance of the powers that tend to debase the race that was articulated by a fearless man of valor.

The headline of the November 23rd edition of New York Age read, “Dr. Powell’s Crusade Against Abnormal Vice Is Approved.” According to New York Age, hundreds of personal expressions were received during the course of the week, as well as a number of letters from people relating individual instances of moral sexual perversion of which they had some knowledge. Of particular note were institutions of learning and institutions
where community welfare workers interfaced with a large number of girls and women. Additionally, the paper reported that it had received approval from leading churchmen, as well as prominent leaders from other lines of work.

Several preachers prominent in New York preached sermons in support of Powell Sr.’s position. Among them was the Reverend Dr. William Lloyd, pastor of St. James Presbyterian Church. Preaching on the eighteenth and fifteenth amendments to the U.S. Constitution, Lloyd commended Powell Sr.’s attack on vices in high places without mentioning Powell Sr. by name. The editors of New York Age suggested that, since the delivery of his sermon, additional sources had come forward to Powell Sr., alerting him to the fact that he only scratched the surface in his former investigations—that the instances of evil and moral degeneracy and sexual perversion among White and colored men and women were far more deeply rooted than previously realized. Powell Sr. concluded that much of the prevalence of these vicious habits was due to contact and association and not to inherent degeneracy. He suggested that thrill-seeking of an unusual character by the modern youth is responsible for these vicious habits.

On March 19, 1935, a major riot broke out in Harlem. At the end of the night, more than seventy-five people, mostly Black, had been arrested and charged with inciting the riot. Fifty-seven civilians and seven policemen were injured. This incident came to be known as the Harlem Riot of 1935. For Powell Sr., the incident represented much more. He interpreted the incident as a turning point in the consciousness of Blacks living in New York. Further, upon hearing his son explain the uprising as being rooted in systemic
constructs of poverty, racism, and unemployment, he concluded that new ideas and new leadership were needed. So in May 1935, Powell Sr. began a process of resignation.  

He offered his first letter of resignation on May 18, 1935. It was summarily rejected by the joint boards of the church, and he was voted a six-month leave, with pay. While the rest was rejuvenating, Powell Sr. tendered his final letter of resignation in September 1937. With much reluctance, the joint boards accepted his decision.

Clearly, Powell Sr., who at first had been a religious leader whose skills seemed to match perfectly the needs of his community, had grown increasingly disconnected from the complex economic, cultural, and spiritual needs of the folks who most needed his guidance. It makes sense, given his enormous social standing, that his attempts to resign were rebuffed, at least initially. However, it appears that he had sufficient self-awareness to know that his time, and the relevance of his style of benevolent patriarchy, had passed. In passing the mantle of leadership to his son, it seems as though he hoped that the Powell dynasty might continue, although there appears to be little evidence that he understood what form the new leadership would take, only that it would stay in the family!

**From Father to Son**

Adam Clayton Powell Jr. was a multifaceted individual, challenging any writer who undertakes his biography to carefully state who he was and who he was not. It is

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63 Ibid., 150.
impossible, in this brief biological sketch, to say all of who he was. It is possible, however, for one to say readily who he was not. He was not Adam Clayton Powell Sr. In many ways he was the opposite. Powell Sr. was a pious, deeply religious, puritanical Protestant pastor, one who sought to live his life beyond reproach. He was a man who could throw down a gauntlet before the city, challenging others unequivocally to speak openly of any illicit behavior on his part. He even offered to provide an open opportunity for concerns to be heard at the church and before the people he pastored. Powell Jr. could never do these things.

Powell Jr. walked on both sides of the street: church street as a holy man and blues alley as a blues man. There was the perpetual lure of the nightlife with drinking, club hopping, and social glamor for Powell Jr. This attraction was identified during his first years at college, which in turn led to his academic failure. Nightlife was a recreational space he never abandoned.

Simultaneously, Powell Jr. was a profound gospel preacher, capable of preaching until congregants, and ultimately political audiences, rose to their feet in response. At no point in his life did it appear to him to be anything else other than who he is. For Powell Jr., the pathway from “class church” to “mass church” was a merger of both constituencies. To this end and to his own satisfaction, Powell Jr. did the unthinkable—he ultimately married a blues woman, twice.

Powell Jr. came to the Abyssinian Baptist Church as an infant wrapped in a blanket. In due time, he would become its most famous pastor, wielding unprecedented power throughout Harlem, the nation, and internationally. As a son of Abyssinian, he was dressed by his mother Mattie in Little Lord Fauntleroy suits with flowing black ties and
patent leather shoes. In winter he wore a gray, Persian lamb coat. This attire clearly denoted him as a child of a New York, middle-class family. Between his mother, his nurse Josephine, and his sister Blanche, Powell Jr. was well nurtured.

Just before his sixth birthday, he contracted a respiratory illness. The illness was a great surprise to his family, as he was a strong and husky boy. With sadness, he was prohibited from playing games with other children and was always carried around by his mother, sister, or nurse. Powell Jr. emerged from this illness with an inseparable love for his sister, declaring on several occasions his desire to marry her at a future point. It is only after his father took him away for a weekend in Maine and explained the facts of life did he realize that that particular dream never could come true.

Powell Jr., academically brilliant like his father, entered college at the age of sixteen. Unlike his father, however, it was the extracurricular activities that garnered his attention. By his own admission, Powell Jr. gave considerable time and energy to liquor, women, and frivolity. At the end of his first semester, he failed three subjects. This poor performance automatically dismissed him from the college. Fortunately for Powell Jr., his father knew the president of City College of New York and begged for a second chance for his son. Powell Jr. was allowed to return to the college the following semester. It was during that academic year, however, that his sister died.


65 Ibid., 21.

66 Ibid., 27.
Blanche had instructed Powell Jr. about fashion. Within the family, Blanche was the one who kept up with the latest fashion, alerting the family of the latest trends. It was Blanche who taught Powell Jr. to dance, play cards, and enjoy music. She prepared him for the social world, something his puritanical father could not do. Because of Blanche, Powell Jr. entered college as a great poker player and a great dancer.

Her death was the first real tragedy he faced, and it destroyed his faith. Six years would pass before this loss of faith would be restored. Powell Jr. had entered Colgate University, an all-male school of nine hundred men that was thirty-five miles from the nearest town and was located in the Cherry Valley of Upstate New York. He later recalled a snowy night when he was working on some papers for one of his professors. It was two o’clock in the morning when Powell heard his call to ministry. The next morning he notified his parents, both of whom were overjoyed.

Powell Jr. graduated from Colgate University on June 7, 1930. His parents, understanding the value of liminality, among other concerns, gifted him a ticket to Europe and twenty-five hundred dollars. However, his parents had a secondary motive. Their intent was to separate him from the woman with whom he had fallen in love—Isabel Washington. Powell Jr. promised his father that he would not contact her while he was away. He broke his promise almost immediately when he cabled her, speaking only of his love for her, on his first night at sea. Clearly, his father’s objections fell on deaf ears. Three years would pass before Isabel became Powell Jr.’s first wife.

Ibid., 28.

Ibid., 35.
Isabel Washington was a divorcée with a son. In fact, she was merely separated from her husband when she and Powell Jr. met. Washington, slightly older than Powell Jr., was a member of the chorus line at the famous Harlem Cotton Club and had appeared in a movie with Bessie Smith, playing the role of the “other woman.” She was in a show on Broadway called *Harlem* when she was introduced to Powell Jr. by her aunt. Powell Jr. had happened to be in town on one of his excursions from Colgate University to New York City. He and a friend, Al Campbell, who owned a Pierce Arrow, would drive to New York City nearly every weekend. These excursions were also a source of income, as they would fill up suitcases full of bootleg whiskey and gin, which they then sold on campus for a substantial profit.\(^6^9\)

To the chagrin of Powell Sr., Washington sought to be a good wife to Powell Jr. In fact, she agreed to be baptized at the Abyssinian Baptist Church, after being raised in the Catholic Church. In later years, she would tell a humorous story regarding her baptism. Noting that baptism in the Baptist church meant total immersion and that Powell Sr. was administering the baptism, she remembered being extremely nervous. When Powell Sr. placed his hand over her nose and mouth, as is the custom, and dunked her, she came up fighting, thinking that he was trying to get rid of her on the spot!\(^7^0\) She was, after all, a blues woman.

Powell Sr. was unable to dissuade his son from the marriage and suggested that Powell Jr. gain approval of the board of deacons, as he served as the assistant pastor of

\(^{69}\) Ibid., 34.

\(^{70}\) Ibid., 85.
the Abyssinian Baptist Church. The deacons gave their consent, and on March 8, 1933, Powell Jr. and Washington held a fabulous wedding with three thousand attendees at the Abyssinian Baptist Church. Sometime after their marriage, Washington gave up her career to devote her energies to family and the ministry of the church. She also gave up the nightlife of clubs, alcohol, and dance. Powell Jr., however, did not.

During his graduation trip, the Great Depression seized the United States. Powell Jr. returned home on October 1, 1930, to discover a twenty percent unemployment rate in Harlem. Fortunately for him, there was a job awaiting his return as business manager of the church and assistant minister to his father. His attendance at Colgate University and his European excursion had completely inoculated him from the economic conditions of Harlem and the United States in general. Upon his return, Powell Jr. discovered that in Atlanta, Georgia, sixty-five percent of the Negro population were on relief. In Birmingham, Alabama, sixty-three percent were on relief; seventy-five percent were on relief in Charlotte, North Carolina; and eighty-one percent were on relief in Norfolk, Virginia.

In Harlem, Powell Jr. witnessed hundreds of women huddled against the wall at a busy intersection in the Bronx. He came to understand that these were unemployed domestic workers who would stand at this juncture from six o’clock a.m. until late at night, attempting to sell their labor to anyone walking by. The going hourly rate was ten cents per hour for a full day’s work. Black people were not the only ones thrown into desperation; poor Whites also suffered. Powell Jr.’s immediate concern and

71 Ibid., 80.
72 Ibid., 56.
contradiction, however, focused on the sixty-three percent of school children in the Abyssinian Baptist Church neighborhood who were suffering from malnutrition, while he lived in the ten-room penthouse above the church. Powell Jr. went to work, employing his agency, creativity, and power tempered with compassion.

For example, when five outstanding doctors of the Harlem community were banned from Harlem Hospital because they were Black, despite the fact that it was the only public hospital in Harlem that served a totally Black community, Powell Jr. went to work. Within a few months and with much coordination and vision, Powell Jr. was a twenty-two-year-old pastor leading a mass delegation of six thousand people to City Hall, demanding reform at Harlem Hospital.73

The absence of any department of public welfare or any single agency designed to address the problem of the Depression did not limit Powell Jr.’s vision. He met with some of New York’s major financiers in an attempt to create work opportunities. Pulling together as many philanthropic dollars as he could, he instituted a work program for the residents of Harlem. Unfortunately, his efforts were not enough. Thousands would line up every day asking for work, even if it meant earning only a few dollars.74

To address the issue of hunger, Powell Jr. set up a free food kitchen and relief bureau at the Abyssinian Baptist Church. In its first, few years, the food kitchen would serve more than twenty-eight thousand free meals, send out hundreds of baskets containing more than two thousand free dinners, and give away thousands of pieces of bread and

73 Ibid., 58.
74 Ibid., 59.
pastry. Powell Jr. could often be found at the food kitchen. He would personally greet the recipients and often took the time to listen to their stories, struggles, hopes, and dreams for themselves and their children. In the midst of all of this, Powell Jr. and the Abyssinian Baptist Church continued to address the needs of incoming Black migrants from the South.

Given the economic devastation of the Great Depression, eviction was also a major issue in Harlem. It was not unusual for people to be evicted in the dead of winter with snow on the ground. It was not unusual for a hundred fifty people to stand in line at Powell Jr.’s office, all of them facing eviction notices. With the help of Dr. W. Adrian Freeman, a brilliant traumatic surgeon and a member of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, Powell Jr. devised a rent strike technique. The first step was to organize the entire building awaiting an eviction. Once a single family was evicted, representatives would be sent to the owner of the building demanding that they put the family back in their home and if not, every family in the building would refuse to pay their rent. An escrow account was set up into which the rents were paid as they became due. It was not in the landlord’s best interest to evict an entire building due to the expenses of the city marshal, the loss of income via rent, and the prohibitive costs of the required painting and fixing of apartments for new tenants. This approach was apparently successful for a number of years.

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75 McNeil et al., *Witness*, 158.
76 Powell Jr., *Adam by Adam*, 61.
77 Ibid.
In his pastoral capacity, Powell Jr. combined concepts of the Social Gospel with New York City’s progressive politics to push for the economic empowerment of Harlem residents. Yet, even though Powell Jr. was clearly moving beyond the economic independence his father had preached to a search for economic justice, he wondered if there was more he could do. Could he do more to help bring the kingdom of heaven to Earth?  

While preaching to five thousand people every Sunday and with a church membership of ten thousand parishioners, having fed and clothed thousands, housed and prevented the eviction of hundreds, and having achieved a high name recognition among the two hundred thousand Blacks living in Harlem in the early 1930s, it occurred to Powell Jr. that he might run for political office. His father had once considered this dream. On September 25, 1941, Powell Jr. announced his candidacy for the City Council of New York City. He ran as an independent candidate. When the election was held, he came in third out of ninety-nine candidates and earned a seat on the City Council of one of the world’s largest cities as an independent who was not controlled by either political party. Using the city council seat as a springboard, Powell Jr. was elected three years later to the U.S. House of Representatives as the second African-American congressman elected in the twentieth century. Powell Jr. maintained his position as pastor of Abyssinian until it became untenable due to a series of warrants for his arrest.

78 McNeil et al., Witness, 159.
79 Powell Jr., Adam by Adam, 69.
At noon on January 3, 1945, Powell Jr. was sworn in as a member of the seventy-ninth Congress of the United States. He was the first congressman to represent the newly established twenty-second district of New York. Present at the ceremony were some of the old deacons from the Abyssinian Baptist Church looking down from the gallery. Also in attendance was Powell Sr. Unfortunately, Powell Jr.’s mother was sick and unable to attend. The elephant in the room that day was Powell Jr.’s elegant female companion, Hazel Scott, the new love of his life. The two walked through the halls of Congress, even though he was still married to Isabel Washington Powell at the time.

Three months after Powell Jr.’s ascent to the U.S. House of Representative, his mother died. She was remembered as a caring woman who gave much to the Abyssinian Baptist Church. In her own way, she gave as much as her husband and her son. She was a regal woman and yet very approachable. Some of the congregation thought that her death might be the shock necessary to drive Powell Jr. back into the arms of his wife and to reconcile their marriage. These hopes and pipe dreams were quickly dashed when Powell Jr. and Scott came to the funeral together, placing flowers on his mother’s casket. Some congregants thought this act was the height of immorality.\(^8^0\)

On August 1, 1945, Powell Jr. married Scott—his second blues-woman wife. Scott was born in Port of Spain, Trinidad, in June 1920. She was four when her parents brought her to the United States. Her father, A. Thomas Scott, was an educated scholar trained in England. He found that his academic prowess was not appreciated in the

United States. He was reduced to menial labor and dead-end jobs and subsequently fell into deep depression. Her mother, Elma Scott, was a musician; she supplemented their limited family income by playing with various bands and musical groups. Upon her husband’s death, she became the sole breadwinner for the family, having to support her daughter and her own mother.81

One day when she was four, Scott climbed onto the piano stand and began picking out a tune. It was discovered that she had near-perfect pitch. Her family considered her a musical genius, an attribute later verified by the Juilliard School of Music. Given the family’s financial situation, Scott’s mother had no choice but to bring her into the world of adult music. At age thirteen, Scott held her first Manhattan recital. Three years later, she was hosting her own radio show. At age eighteen, she was on Broadway. In 1939 she was featured at the New York World’s Fair. In the same year, she formed her own all-female band. While strikingly attractive, she was noted for her salty language that she picked up in nightspots, which was a common characteristic among blues women. While most women were said to be jealous of Scott, she took it all in stride.

Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement

It is important to note that Powell Jr. was considered among the pronounced leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. It was a well-deserved title, as he had practiced nonviolent protests and economic boycotts decades before these tactics would be codified

81 Ibid., 120–121.
as viable strategies for achieving civil rights.\(^{82}\) About twenty years later, after the Harlem Hospital incident and the success of the “rent boycott,” a new Black pastor emerged, whose southern movement earned him national publicity and acknowledgment. His name was Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Thus began a rivalry between the two most significant contributors to the Civil Rights Movement. Powell Jr., ever the politician, sought to use this rivalry to his advantage.

When the Abyssinian Baptist Church celebrated its one hundred fifty-seventh anniversary in November 1965, Powell Jr. invited King to preach. The two leaders of the Civil Rights Movement appeared to put aside any differences they might have had. In his introduction of King, Powell Jr. called him “my beloved friend.” He went on to note that he had said many times to various people that King was the greatest living American, Black or White. Powell Jr. called him a humanitarian and a citizen of the world who has made the entire globe his pastorate. King drew a massive crowd to the Abyssinian Baptist Church that Sunday morning, with estimates in excess of five thousand people. But the church house in which they met, and the anniversary they met to celebrate, was about the Powell dynasty, and King was Powell’s guest, not the other way around.

When King rose before the congregation, he recognized Powell Jr. for his decades of civil rights advocacy. King said of Powell Jr. that he was “tall physically, tall in influence, tall in stature and tall in commitment.”\(^{83}\) King noted that, before many of those assembled were ever born, Powell Jr. had already been picketing, working, and organiz-

\(^{82}\) McNeil et al., *Witness*, 231.

\(^{83}\) Ibid., 227.
ing in the Harlem community. King, the consummate preacher, spoke on the sermon topic, “What to Do When the Lights Go Out.” There had been a blackout in New York the preceding Tuesday before he spoke, which caused much mayhem and confusion. King, a gifted preacher, used the relevancy of the recent mayhem to harness the attention of his northern audience.

In addition to the personal difficulties and pressures of the King-Powell Jr. relationship, the White power structure also sought to play these Black leaders against each other. At Ghana’s celebration of independence in March 1957, Powell Jr. had introduced King to Vice President Richard Nixon. Nixon, who was serving under President Dwight Eisenhower, subsequently promised King that he would bring the government’s Contract Compliance Committee to the South at an early date. Congressman Powell Jr. had been requesting such a meeting for a considerable period of time, without a response from Eisenhower or Nixon. Several months after Nixon extended this offer to King—an offer King considered to be a promise—Powell Jr. and King spoke. King communicated that he had heard nothing from Nixon. Given this information, Powell Jr. wrote to President Eisenhower, reminding him that seven months had passed since the initial promise of this meeting and to date, nothing had occurred. This letter was written in January.

In May of the same year, communications went out indicating that President Eisenhower was now ready to hold the White House Conference on Government Contract Compliance that Powell Jr. had requested earlier. The unexpected outcome of

84 Ibid.
Powell Jr.’s request was that he was not invited to attend. Those invited included King, A. Philip Randolph of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, Lester Granger of the National Urban League, and Roy Wilkins of the NAACP. The White power structure had appointed new leadership to this phase of the Civil Rights Movement, playing King’s and Wilkins’ leadership and prominence against that of Clayton Powell. Powell Jr., who at the time was under indictment for tax evasion and who was still a congressman, could readily be excluded.85

Powell Jr. was not, however, through with this group of newly appointed civil rights leaders. The 1960 Democratic Convention was on the horizon and, given his victory in his tax evasion case, Powell Jr. had new momentum.86 He would make a play to sustain his role as the top leader of the Civil Rights Movement when the opportunity presented itself.

A Public Statement

Anyone interested in Adam Clayton Powell Jr.’s binary view of sexuality could find his thinking openly articulated nine years before his threat to King and Rustin. In a 1951 article published in Ebony magazine, Powell notes the problematic rise of sexual degeneracy among a small number of Black preachers. By that, he meant the increase in homosexuality, which he viewed as perversion rather than as a gift.87

85 Powell Jr., Adam by Adam, 138.

86 Haywood, King of the Cats, 261.

As a solution, he promotes sex education in the church. He openly calls Black preachers to task, accusing them of sins of omission—silence in the face of this sexual degeneracy on one hand and, on the other, a failure to promote informed programs of sexual education as a way to prevent abnormal sex practices among their parishioners. Powell notes that, historically, any discussion of sexual matters had been taboo in the church, but he insists that such an attitude is inappropriate. Powell views the task of the church as serving the whole person.

From Powell’s perspective, this education process should begin at an early age. Using his son “Skipper” (then about five years of age) as an example, Powell asserts that youngsters should be knowledgeable about sex before puberty, so that, as their bodies change, they can anticipate the changes without alarm. Powell says that Skipper knows that he was born from his mother’s womb and that this is the life process, something that the young man does not see as shameful, wrong, or dirty.

In the final section of the article, “Decries Homosexual Tendencies,” the Abyssinian pastor states that the “boys with the swish, and the girls with the swagger” are becoming too numerous and bold. Furthermore, he says, the church must do something to help these “haunted” people. Powell says that he believes that homosexuality is rooted in the biological or the psychological or is a failure of a young person to receive proper sexual education.

Ever the politician/preacher, Powell is quick to add that queer people should not be turned away from the church. While openly describing queer people as degenerate, unnatural, depraved, swishy men and women with swagger, Powell says that the church should not turn away these sexually abnormal individuals. From Powell’s perspective, it
is the mission of the church to attract and reform them. How anyone might feel welcome in a religious context when they are being “othered” in this manner is an open question. Perhaps Powell’s eye was on the offering plate!

**In Summary**

When asked to describe the difference between his ministry and the ministry of his son, Powell Sr. observed that his role was to build and his son’s role was to interpret. Build he did. He built in a period of unprecedented national poverty. He built with the finite means of Black men and women who were facing high levels of unemployment and discrimination. Despite the prevailing circumstances, he built not only an institutional structure but also a communal consciousness of the possible.

After building the new church structure at a cost of about three hundred thirty-four thousand dollars, there remained a sixty-thousand-dollar mortgage. John D. Rockefeller Jr., a Baptist and major contributor to Riverside Baptist Church, approached Powell Sr. with an interesting proposition. Rockefeller offered to pay the entire amount on the condition that he would appoint one member of the Abyssinian board of trustees. This was not a decision Powell Sr. could make alone. He brought this proposal not just to the trustee board but rather to the united boards of the church. They turned down the proposal unanimously.  


89 Powell Jr., *Adam by Adam*, 52.
Somewhere between the preaching of the gospel, the narrative of civility, and the fellowship that the membership shared, this community came to understand its agency and potential for greatness. All of which points back to Powell Sr. and his preparedness and understanding of inspired leadership. There is an African American adage that says, “You can’t teach what you don’t know, and you can’t lead where you don’t go.”

As it relates to Powell Jr., Dr. Samuel Proctor eulogized him by saying, “He gave us our first evidence that American institutions were capable of any change at all. He gave us a new basis for hope when our churches, colleges, unions, hotels—all were segregated.”

There is no greater example of Proctor’s statement than what came to be known as the “Powell Amendment.” Powell Jr. fashioned it after an amendment offered in 1819 by James Tallmadge in an attempt to limit the spread of slavery. It was an amendment suitable for attachment to any type of bills. Its purpose was to stop federal funding in states that discriminated against Blacks. It was a classic amendment proposed in a time when such amendments were out of fashion in Congress. As a result, it was a startling piece of legislation.

When the federal school lunch program was proposed during Powell Jr.’s first years in Washington, he attached the amendment. The bill designated one hundred million dollars for school lunches. However, with the amendment, the monies could go only to those states that had desegregated their schools. Southerners from Alabama,

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91 Haywood, King of the Cats, 134.
Georgia, and Texas, for example, had the most to lose. Powell Jr. came under great pressure to withdraw the amendment, but he did not cave to the pressure. He understood that Blacks were not the only children who would benefit from the bill; White children would benefit as well. If the voting parents of White children lost the lunch program, they would blame their congressmen, not Powell Jr. The amendment passed two hundred fifty-eight to one hundred nine.92 This story is just one example of the progressive “agency” accomplished by Adam Clayton Powell Jr.

**Analysis**

Disruption is disruption, whether by an increase of privilege or a loss of privilege and the resulting marginalization. Disruption demands a rethinking of one’s position. Such was the case for Black males and females given Emancipation. What it meant to be a man or what it meant to be a woman and how they would relate to each other intimately and otherwise all had to be rethought. Emancipation demanded a reimagining of sex and gender roles, even as it demanded a rethinking of leadership. Unfortunately, these formerly enslaved people had witnessed only two models of leadership: White cis benevolent patriarchy and White cis dominating patriarchy.

White cis benevolent patriarchy resembles a man whose power is tempered by compassion. This is the model of leadership chosen by Adam Clayton Powell Sr. As a benevolent patriarch, his focus and emphasis were on the provision and well-being of his family. He chose to protect his wife and children and his church, to provide for them and stabilize their lives with love and compassion. In so doing, he believed he was carrying

92 Ibid.
out his duty and responsibility as a Black man. Author and educator bell hooks suggests that there are three major characteristics of a benevolent patriarch: his focus is his family, he does not employ violence as a means of control, and he supports gender equality. All three of these characteristics apply to Adam Clayton Powell Sr. In addition to his love of family, both blood and communal, we do not find him employing violence as a means of control. He appears to have acquired his power through love, hard work, personal piety, and consistency. Additionally, he was supportive of the advancement of Black women, associating with men of like thought and openly hiring a woman to administer Abyssinian’s community center.

Unlike his father, Powell Jr. was a dominating patriarch. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. utilized the framework of a White cis dominating patriarch to shape his leadership style. While there is no indication that Powell Jr. ever used physical violence to maintain control, his marital record and treatment of women suggest a rather patriarchal sexuality: that is, an implied dominance regarding his sexual expression. It is to be remembered that he came into his mother’s wake, bearing flowers from him and his new girlfriend, publicly shunning his present wife Isabel. This is not physical violence, but it certainly could be categorized as emotional abuse. Black males who adopted the dominating patriarch model desired that all individuals in their circle of influence be subject to them. These were Black males who took their wives and children to the shed and beat them as they had seen Massa do during the period of enslavement.

Powell sought this type of dominance relative to Martin Luther King and Bayard Rustin. Powell never considered King or Rustin his equal. After the Eisenhower-Nixon meeting, Powell determined to find a way privately to limit their activity, i.e., the threat to circulate a lie regarding their relationship. Dominating patriarchs tend not to view queer men as men at all but rather as misfits, beneath their dignity. One can logically come to this conclusion when one remembers that, to the dominating, cis White patriarch, Black male bodies were chattel. Black male bodies were valued according to their capacity to produce labor or produce progeny. A Black queer body could do neither and was subsequently without value, without protection, and subject to the whims of violence. Black males who have internalized self-hatred, as many do, are predisposed to hate themselves and other Black male images that mirror them. How much more might they despise a queer Black male of no worth?

This chapter was written to illustrate the tremendous power and resilience of Black churches and the great breadth and capacity of prepared religious leadership. However, with all of the vision that the Powells manifested to empower the broader Black community, it is critical to note that there was no inclusion, and subsequently no vision, for queer people. Their power, tempered by compassion toward the poor and homeless, was not extended to Black, queer males and females. Rather, the queer were labeled degenerates, to be cast into utter darkness, where there is great weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:12)! And pastors across the nation, mentored into leadership, received permission to do the same. It is this practice that is a religious abomination before a just and righteous God.

63
Chapter 2:
Of Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King, and Initiating Social Change

*There’s a man over the river giving sight to the blind.*
—Traditional

*Early Protests, Incarcerations, and Lessons Learned*

Bayard Rustin was a lifelong protester and activist against injustice—wherever it might be found! Beginning in his hometown of West Chester, Pennsylvania, and extending to Sub-Saharan Africa, wherever he identified oppression and subjugation, he willingly placed his mind, soul, and body in opposition.94 In his high school days, he confronted the local YMCA director by asking him to explain the agency’s policy of discrimination.95 In his second year of college he organized a strike against the poor quality of food being served at Wilberforce University, placing his scholarship at risk, and was subsequently asked not to return.96 Over his entire lifetime, Rustin would be arrested twenty-two times in his fight for civil right.97


95 Ibid., 13.

96 Ibid., 15.

The arrests begin in 1940, when Congress enacted the Selective Service Act, which included provisions for conscientious objector status. However, this status was not afforded to Bayard, even though he was a Quaker and had filed the appropriate governmental forms. In January 1944, Bayard was arrested and subsequently pleaded guilty to draft avoidance. Bayard was not alone in his action, as one in six inmates in federal prison during World War II was a conscientious objector to the war. Given his guilty plea, Rustin was sentenced to three years in prison and afforded ten days to settle his affairs.\(^98\)

Bayard, of course, viewed his imprisonment as an opportunity to create social change. Immediately, the prison complex viewed him as a troublemaker, and he was classified as a “notorious offender.”\(^99\) Subsequently, he was sent to the federal prison at Ashland, Kentucky, located along the banks of the Ohio River, where three states—Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia—converge. There Rustin settled into a status of nonviolent resistance, particularly as it related to the prison’s segregationist practices.\(^100\)

One particularly startling incident occurred after Rustin had convinced the prison authorities to allow free movement between the White and Black sections of Bayard’s cell block. While there was no formal announcement regarding this change, guards simply left unlocked the gate dividing the two racial groups. While the other Black prisoners chose not to cross the color line, Rustin could not resist. He would join the

\(^98\) Haskins, Bayard Rustin, 72-76.

\(^99\) Ibid., 77.

\(^100\) Ibid., 81.
White prisoners on Sunday afternoons as they listened to the symphony broadcast on the radio.

Rustin’s violation of the color line proved to be too much for one White inmate, “Judge” Huddleston. The “Judge,” as he was called, had formerly held a statewide position but was eventually convicted of fraud. Huddleston was a firm adherent of White supremacy, and Rustin’s disregard for segregation pushed the “Judge” over the edge. One Sunday, during the symphonic concert, Huddleston left the room and, returning to the White section with a broom handle, began to beat Rustin unmercifully. Rustin, covering his head with his hands, asked the guards who had been summoned not to restrain Huddleston. The “Judge” broke the broom handle across the Bayard’s back and continued to beat him until he was fully exhausted, at which point he collapsed onto the floor. Rustin’s act was a perfect example of the power of nonviolent resistance. It earned Bayard great respect from many of the inmates, particularly those who were conscientious objectors. It should be noted that the prison authorities punished Rustin for his inaction and found no cause to reprimand Huddleston.101

Rustin’s second period of incarceration occurred shortly after the Supreme Court struck down racial segregation on public motor carriers in the case of Irene Morgan v. the Commonwealth of Virginia, June 3, 1946. In an attempt to determine to what extent the new desegregation federal law was being observed, Rustin and several of the White staff of the Fellowship of Reconciliation decided to take a bus ride through some southern

101 Ibid., 83–84. See also Daniel Levine, Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2000), 1–2.
states to evaluate their progress. In Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Rustin was arrested for sitting next to a White man and was sentenced to thirty days on the chain gang. Having served his sentence, Rustin reflected on the conditions of the chain gang for the New York Post in an article entitled, “Twenty-Two Days on the Chain Gang.” So glaringly inhumane was the treatment that Rustin described that, shortly after the article’s publication, the chain gangs of North Carolina were discontinued.

Rustin’s third period of incarceration would prove to have the most enduring impact, both personally and professionally. On January 21, 1953, Bayard Rustin was arrested for sexual perversion in a public place and charged with lewd vagrancy. Rustin and his companions were each sentenced to sixty days in jail. While Bayard had always been open regarding his sexuality and never ashamed, this arrest and the circumstances surrounding the arrest were a major public embarrassment not only for Bayard but also for the pacifist community and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, where Bayard had been employed, affiliated, and nurtured for most of his career. Lewd vagrancy and acts of sexual perversion flew in the face of the prevailing narrative of civility for society in the 1950s. To be entangled in such behavior had the potential to discredit any and all acts of benevolence that preceded it. At this juncture in society, homosexuality was considered a malady, a sickness, a depravity, a revolting unnatural

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102 Haskins, Bayard Rustin, 138. See also Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin, a film by Bennet Singer and Nancy Kates.

103 Brother Outsider. See also Levine, Bayard Rustin, 63–64, where he notes that Rustin took too much credit for the impact of his article.

104 D’Emilio, Lost Prophet, 149.
act. In fact, Rustin’s psychologist diagnosed him as an “obligatory homosexual,” in reference to the compulsory nature of Bayard’s sexual expression.\textsuperscript{105} Further, public notice of this incident would certainly be noted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which had followed Rustin’s actions since his three-year affiliation with the Communist Youth League.\textsuperscript{106} From this point forward, there would be a chorus of nay-sayers who fully appreciated and admired Bayard’s knowledge base, skill level, agency, creativity, and potential for significant contribution, yet always weighed these attributes over and against the risk of public embarrassment and exposure regarding his sexuality.

It is during this period that Rustin wrestled internally with the “moral challenge” of his queerness as never before.\textsuperscript{107} He searched for some solace, as he worked side-by-side with Christian men and women of great intolerance when it came to issues of sexuality. In his thinking, Bayard appeared to move toward the secular, which suggests some failure or inadequacy in his capacity to construct a viable and empowering Christian theology. Daniel Levine observes that, after the 1953 incident, one finds no further reference to God or Jesus in Bayard’s writings or speeches. However, by some unidentified, unarticulated process, during this decade of the fifties, Bayard restored his sense of self-acceptance and began to argue that the discrimination faced by Blacks is parallel to the discrimination faced by homosexuals.\textsuperscript{108}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{105} Levine, \textit{Bayard Rustin}, 72-73.
\bibitem{106} D’Emilio, \textit{Lost Prophet}, 34.
\bibitem{107} Levine, \textit{Bayard Rustin}, 70.
\bibitem{108} Ibid., 73-75.
\end{thebibliography}
Rustin, the Montgomery Movement, and Advising Dr. King

Martin Luther King Jr. was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1929, into a Black middle-class family. His father, Martin Luther King Sr., was an educated Baptist minister, a graduate of Morehouse College, and active in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Baptist Convention. King Sr. became the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church of Atlanta upon the death of his wife’s father. King Sr.’s wife, Alberta, was also a very capable individual. She was a graduate of Hampton University, having trained as an educator.109

Martin Jr. was an exceptional student, skipping a couple of grades at the high-school level. Martin graduated from Morehouse College in 1948 with a bachelor’s degree in sociology. He then moved on to Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, where he attained a second bachelor’s degree, this time in divinity. Four years later, in 1955, Martin earned a PhD degree from Boston University School of Theology. Toward the end of these academic accomplishments, Martin married Coretta Scott in 1953 and the following year assumed his first pastorate at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus, and in four days the Montgomery bus boycott began, to which Martin was elected to the primary role of leadership.110 Martin, though theologically and ethically trained, knew nothing beyond a vague understanding of the principles of

109 Jennifer J. Yanco, Misremembering Dr. King: Revisiting the Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 9-10.

110 Ibid.
nonviolence, nor had he any capacity to implement those principles into a concerted action—until he met Bayard Rustin. In fact, during the initial stages of the Montgomery boycott, with his home and family under threat of violence, King was not even practicing nonviolence. King and the entourage that guarded him carried both pistols and shotguns.\textsuperscript{111}

In retrospect, it is easy to see that the Montgomery bus boycott was vulnerable to implosion on a couple of accounts. First, the initial demand of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) was not total desegregation of the buses, but rather a reordering of the seating process and arrangement. The MIA initially proposed that Blacks would seat themselves from the back of the bus forward, while Whites would seat themselves from the front toward the rear. Given this process, the line of demarcation would vary depending on the ridership of any given day. Further, neither group would be asked to give up its seat for the other. But the intransigence of racial superiority, White supremacy, and White privilege dominated the decision-making process. The bus company was totally unwilling to negotiate. Had the bus company immediately or even gradually capitulated to the proposal of the MIA, the incident would have been minor and its national significance negligible.\textsuperscript{112}

Second, among the missing historical gaps is mention of the initial fear that Black ministers of Montgomery faced in considering the bus boycott. At one juncture, the ministers wanted to circulate leaflets endorsing the boycott, without letting the White

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 17–18.

\textsuperscript{112} Levine, \textit{Bayard Rustin}, 78.
establishment know of their support. It was E. D. Nixon, president of the local NAACP, who tongue-lashed them by boldly stating that these same ministers had lived off the meager earnings of these poor Black women, whom they had to that date done nothing to support; the bus boycott was a way to change that arrangement. How dare they allow the fear of White retribution to prevent them from standing up? Dixon threatened to put out the word that the boycott had been canceled because the ministers were “too scared.” Needless to say, given the choice of facing White backlash or the wrath of Black women, the ministers chose the safer course. They formed the Montgomery Improvement Association and King was named president.\footnote{Michael Eric Dyson, \textit{I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King Jr.} (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 204.}

Pacifists and activists of nonviolence in New York were keenly attuned to the Montgomery boycott. As previously mentioned, Clayton Powell had provided some insight to the group, but it was the feeling of James Farmer and A. Phillip Randolph and others that someone with knowledge of nonviolent protest should be sent to provide counsel. This became increasingly urgent when a reliable source indicated that pastors and area ministers were compiling an arsenal. The individual identified as most qualified to be sent to Montgomery was Bayard Rustin, as he had studied Gandhian nonviolent protest in India.\footnote{D’Emilio, \textit{Lost Prophet}, 227.}

Bayard arrived in Montgomery on Tuesday, February 21, 1956, the same day that more than one hundred leaders of the movement were indicted by a grand jury for

\footnote{Michael Eric Dyson, \textit{I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King Jr.} (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 204.}

\footnote{D’Emilio, \textit{Lost Prophet}, 227.}
breaking the state’s law forbidding boycotts. A few days earlier, the Montgomery Citizens Council had sponsored a public rally and distributed a leaflet that read, “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all whites are created equal with certain rights; among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of dead niggers.”

Rustin immediately went into action. While his initial assignment was to set up workshops on nonviolence, Rustin recorded his actions in a February 23 letter to his roommate, Arthur Brown, back in New York. After noting that he is writing at two-thirty o’clock a.m., commenting on the heat in Montgomery in February, questioning the viable length of his stay, and noting the fullness of spirit among the people but their lack of know-how, Bayard listed his accomplishments. He had, in fact, changed the title of the “mass meetings” to “prayer meetings” (which are more difficult for authorities to ban), developed a new slogan, and written a song for the opening and closing of prayer meetings. You name what was needed, and Bayard had addressed it in some manner in his first twenty-four hours of visiting Montgomery. It would appear that he drew upon most of his attributes of leadership. Certainly his creativity was present in the song writing. His capacity for discernment and strategy was operative in re-naming the meetings. His agency was also most apparent.

What Bayard did not mention in his letter were the speeches he had drafted for leaders on themes of nonviolence. Additionally, he incorporated a Gandhian tactic related

115 Ibid., 228.

to indictments. He proposed that, rather than waiting at home for the sheriff to arrive and being arrested like criminals, all persons who were indicted should dress in their Sunday best and proudly present themselves en masse to the authorities. Rustin taught the group that they should wear their indictments as a badge of pride.\textsuperscript{117}

Two days later, Rustin wrote home again, outlining the progress that had been accomplished and assessing the social context. He boldly marked this letter as “Confidential: Absolutely Not for Publication.” The purpose in his writing was to keep northern pacifists and nonviolence activists fully informed of the daily events occurring in Montgomery. Rustin accomplished this by including clippings from the local newspapers, forwarding carbon copies of his letters and communiques with the various committees, and sharing his perceptions.\textsuperscript{118}

In his second letter, Bayard was clear in stating that his presence was being noted by the local authorities and that he would not be able to stay in Montgomery very long. When queried as to who he is and the nature of his interest in the boycott, he had been saying that he was doing research for a couple of articles he was writing for national papers,\textsuperscript{119} but this ruse was faltering. The truth is that Rustin stuck out like a sore thumb. Bayard was tall, dark, handsome, and a dresser, often described as “natty.” Additionally, he spoke with a rather foreign-sounding accent, and, in very brief period of time, could be...

\textsuperscript{117} D’Emilio, \textit{Lost Prophet}, 229.

\textsuperscript{118} Rustin, \textit{I Must Resist}, 168–169.

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 174.
observed all over Montgomery.\textsuperscript{120} He did not look southern, he did not sound nor act southern. A day or so after his arrival, the police were monitoring all of his activities.

Bayard noted that all of the phones of Black leaders appear to be tapped. Further, since he had been followed by police cars, he never went out at night. Two White female reporters from northern cities had approached him for information. One was very direct and told him he was being watched very closely and that he should be ready to leave town, by car, at a moment’s notice.\textsuperscript{121} She said that he was suspected of being a Communist leader within the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Among the accomplishments Rustin listed in the second letter was a conference with Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Evidently, the pastors and ministers of Harlem had determined that nonviolence was the best approach to demolishing racial segregation and prejudice. This group was calling upon the entire Negro church to adopt Gandhi-like methods of protest. Bayard also noted success in doing away with the term “boycott.” It was simply too explosive for the context. Despite the terminology, the actions taken were producing economic loss. All of the White merchants felt the impact, and some were prepared to begin negotiations. This change of attitude made the newly adopted slogan of the movement appear promising: “Victory Without Violence.”\textsuperscript{122}

\textsuperscript{120} D’Emilio, \textit{Lost Prophet}, 231.

\textsuperscript{121} Rustin, \textit{I Must Resist}, 169–170.

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 170–172.
Unresolved, however, were several financial concerns. Since December 5, when the movement started, the community had invested approximately thirty-five thousand dollars. Eighteen thousand dollars had been spent helping people to get to work in one of four ways: carpooling, walking (some people walked as much as nineteen miles daily), hitchhiking, and domestic workers being taken to and from work by the families who employed them. With the recent arrest of one hundred fifteen persons, the issue of bail monies had risen to the top of financial needs. Given this scenario, Bayard appealed to northern activists to send money to the movement.\textsuperscript{123}

A unique dynamic of Bayard’s engagement with the Montgomery movement, despite the heightened level of contribution that he is making, was an ever-present insecurity regarding his presence. After he wrote the second letter to his friends in New York, they immediately began to express concern that Bayard should leave. In fact, they held a meeting, which included A. Phillip Randolph and John Swomley, the new executive secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and others, to discuss Bayard’s presence. There were two fears: first, his former participation in the Communist Youth League; second, and more pressing, his 1953 arrest in Pasadena. Both historical entanglements appear to hang over their heads like the sword of Damocles, with significant potential to discredit the movement. From the perspective of the northern contingency, the Communist connection carried a significant negative potential, yet it appears that the

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 173.
potential for a public revelation of the Pasadena incident carried the greater element of fear.124

His allies appeared to be undecided whether they should alert leaders of the
Montgomery movement about these issues or whether they should simply wait for the
issues to surface. They considered warning the movement’s leaders of Bayard’s past, but
they had no way of doing so without informing other listening ears, since it is clear that
all of the leaders’ phones were tapped. Caught in this dilemma, the New York allies
decided that the best option was to extract Bayard from Montgomery, and so they advised
Bayard to leave.125

Bayard agreed to leave, fully aware of their unspoken concerns but thinking that
the decision should rest with King and the other leaders of the Montgomery movement.
Amid all this discussion, local authorities had researched Bayard’s claim regarding a
connection to media outlets and found his claim faulty. In an intense situation like
Montgomery, the authorities could arrest Rustin almost without a valid charge, besides
the fact that he may have misrepresented himself. Additionally, local ministers were “put
off” by Rustin’s effeminate gender expression. With all of these factors at play, King
discretely provided an opportunity for Rustin’s exit. Bayard left Montgomery on
February 29, 1956.126

124 Ibid., 174.
125 Ibid.
126 Ibid.
**Rustin and King on the Down Low**

King traveled to Birmingham seven days later to meet with Rustin and others, to strategize about northern support for the Montgomery boycott. King was particularly concerned and sensitive to the fact that southern Whites and the press would do all that they could do to discredit the movement. If any evidence could be provided to show that northerners or any other outsiders were providing leadership to the movement; all of the movement’s credibility would be lost. To counter this possibility, strict lines of communication were established, and it was determined that all ideas and programmatic options be communicated directly to Dr. King or to E. D. Nixon, a local businessman. Bayard then suggested three different types of service that northerners could offer: 1) suggestions and plans for nonviolent education that could functionally be applied to the bus boycott, 2) techniques and ideas for strengthening the will to resist Montgomery by and through nonviolent means, and 3) ideas that would lead to the broadening of and knowledge of nonviolent resistance.\(^\text{127}\)

Rustin returned to New York in March, and, while continuing to knit a close connection to King, he also began to establish his role as liaison between King and northern progressives. When King visited New York later that same month, it was Rustin who introduced him to key northern leaders. King would meet A. J. Muste and A. Philip Randolph. About this same time, Muste and Rustin formed a short-lived group, the Committee for Nonviolent Integration. This committee became a funnel for northern financial support to the Montgomery boycott. Two months later Rustin would organize

\(^{127}\) *Ibid.*, 175.
and stage his first mass rally—an event held on May 23, 1956, in Madison Square Garden that would draw the likes of Harry Belafonte. But, unbeknown to Rustin, this event would prove to be far more dramatic than he could have imagined, foreshadowing a disruption in his relationship with Martin Luther King.

Primary sponsors of the event included A. Phillip Randolph, founder and president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and Roy Wilkins, executive director of the National Association of Colored People. Of course, Rustin invited Dr. King to the event, but King was unable to attend. Alternatively, the keynote speaker of the evening was to be the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell Jr. The New York Times estimated the crowd in attendance to be between sixteen and twenty thousand people. Mrs. Roosevelt asked to speak last. Belafonte wowed the crowd with several melodies as the evening drew late, but the keynote speaker had not yet arrived. The Garden had been rented until eleven o’clock p.m. and the hour was drawing late. Where was Adam Clayton Powell?

Randolph became anxious and began to pressure Bayard to find out where Powell was. As they debated this conundrum, suddenly, and without warning, all of the lights in the Garden went out. For a matter of moments, the entire auditorium was pitch black. Suddenly, a single spotlight shone in the very rear of the facility and in that light stood Adam Clayton Powell Jr. The crowd broke into adulation chanting, “Adam! Adam! Adam!” as Powell moved down the aisle toward the podium.

128 Levine, Bayard Rustin, 87-89.
Powell Jr. brushed aside the person who was to introduce him and continued to dominate the moment. His speech was not only riveting but also long. As the eleven o’clock deadline approached, Bayard slipped a note to Powell indicating that Mrs. Roosevelt was yet to speak and the Garden was rented only until eleven o’clock. Powell picked up the note, and reading it openly to the crowd asked, “Does anybody know a Bayard Rustin? … Who is he?” Powell went on to say that the note he was reading came from this guy Rustin, and Rustin was asking him to conclude his remarks. Powell then taunted the crowd, asking them whether he should continue his speech or stop. Of course, the crowd wanted to hear his conclusion. Powell went on to conflate his freedom to speak with the larger goal of Black freedom, which was the purpose of the rally. Pressing further, he argued that his speech was about the freedom of Black people and that acquiring this freedom would bear a cost, and if some segment of that cost was the overpayment resulting from a late departure from the Garden—so be it! Send him the bill! Powell and Abyssinian Baptist Church would pay for it! The crowd went wild!¹²⁹

It should be noted that the late departure did generate an overpayment of some five thousand dollars. While the bill was submitted to Powell on several occasions, he never paid it. But from that event forward, it was not difficult to surmise that Powell “had it in” for Rustin.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 89.
Returning to the Rustin/King Bromance

Rustin stayed in contact with King during that summer and, in fact, toured several southern states making speeches about the Montgomery boycott. The line of communication was not a one-way street. King wrote an extensive letter to Bayard in late September, outlining his concerns about financial issues, the intimidating actions of Whites, the attitude of Montgomery Blacks, all questions that Bayard had raised with him in a previous communique.

On November 13, the Supreme Court determined the *Browder v. Gale* case to be unconstitutional. Beyond this victory, Rustin, ever the strategist, was envisioning a more secure structure for the movement in Alabama. He particularly wanted to see a structure centered in activism; with such positioning, it would be very different from the NAACP, whose central focus was in legalism. To this end, Rustin and Stanley Levison wrote and sent to King three separate but related papers in preparation for an upcoming event, the Southern Leadership Conference on Transportation. Excerpts from the three papers of Levison and Rustin provide a deconstruction of the Montgomery movement, placing it in the historical context of the African-American struggle for freedom. In part, they summarize the historical and prevailing attitude of Whites toward Blacks, stating that American history has tended to present the Negro as a “childlike creature” content with his status. But it argues that such a representation misses the “unending series of techniques and methods” that the Negro has employed, “designed to win his freedom.”

131 Rustin, *I Must Resist*, 177.

132 Ibid., 179.
Montgomery was uniquely significant because it was “the first mass protest that was completely Negroid and completely nonviolent.” Second, this movement “touches the entire basis of Southern life, the one-party system, the terror, the absence of voting.” The Montgomery movement reflected the place where the Negro states unequivocally, “This I cannot do. I shall no longer accept this status.” In so stating, the Negro challenged “the whole basis of southern life.”

Another segment of the papers identified three features present in Montgomery but not found in other movements. First, it was organized to utilize all existing institutions within the community so that all of its social strata were involved. Second, “the actions of the people won the respect of their enemy.” The movement was so unified as to be impressive. It reflected a high degree of intelligence in planning and included a high level of moral and ethical motivation. The papers argued that the minds of Whites had been dramatically impacted by this movement, perhaps moving the White community to rethink its position and historical posture. Third, Montgomery was unique because it relied upon the daily active participation of Black people. This was not a situation where a handful of leaders sought to carry through some fundamental change.

The Southern Negro Leaders Conference on Transportation and Nonviolent Integration was convened on January 10–11, 1957, at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, the home pulpit of Martin Luther King Sr. As one might expect, Bayard was central to the administration of this initial event. A second meeting of the Southern Negro

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133 Ibid., 180–181.

134 Ibid., 181–182.
Leaders Conference was held in mid-February. In this conference, it was decided that this organization (ultimately named the Southern Christian Leadership Conference) would serve as King’s institutional base, from which he would launch numerous civil rights campaigns between 1957 and 1968.\footnote{Ibid., 183.}

While detailing the myriad contributions of Rustin to King is informative, one must not miss that Rustin believed King to possess the essential qualities of a great spiritual leader, a spiritual leader that Rustin viewed as essential to initiate and lead a broad-based revolution that is spiritual, political, and economic. As Rustin promoted King onto the national stage on one hand, he was quietly shaping the Civil Rights Movement in ways that emphasized spiritual themes that resonated and were compelling to the larger national public.\footnote{Ibid., 177.} For the rest of the 1950s, Rustin gave himself to the goal of promoting King as a national leader and shaping the Civil Rights Movement.\footnote{D’Emilio, \textit{Lost Prophet}, 266.}

During this period, Rustin found innumerable ways to support King. He introduced King to major labor leaders, like Ralph Helstein of the Packinghouse Workers, who in turn became financial supporters of the SCLC. Rustin drafted speeches and articles for King and served as an editor to King’s own writing. Rustin helped King write \textit{Stride Toward Freedom}, King’s account of the Montgomery bus boycott. Here Bayard offered comments and suggestions on chapters and worked with the editors and publishers to effect the book’s promotion and distribution. When the conference with

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Richard Nixon occurred, it was Rustin who advised King how he should proceed. It was Rustin who helped King synthesize the relationships between the struggle of Negroes for justice and the related plight of all poor people. He helped King see the connection between the freedom movement in the South and the struggle for independence in Africa. Rustin linked King to significant social justice organizations such as CORE. He put all of his contacts at King’s disposal. When it was arranged for King to go to Ghana in 1957, Rustin contacted Bill Sutherland, his resource in Ghana, and shaped King’s itinerary so as to maximize the content of the visit. Rustin had a similar involvement in King’s 1959 trip to India.\footnote{Ibid.}

A pinnacle event for King was the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom. Shortly after the SCLC was launched, it was determined that a letter should be sent to President Eisenhower regarding the South’s blatant disregard for the Supreme Court’s decision in \textit{Brown v. Board of Education}. Rustin, along with Stanley Levison, wrote the letter, outlining the lawlessness that was occurring, which for some communities was becoming a daily event. They detailed the night bombings that had exploded in churches and the homes of various ministers and citizens. They described their situation as being under “an organized campaign of violence and terror.” The letter asked the President to come to the South and give a speech on law and order. Eisenhower subsequently denied the request. It is then determined that, since he would not come to the South, the southern ministers will
come to the nation’s capital in a prayer pilgrimage. Rustin, of course, was put in charge as primary coordinator.139

Given Rustin’s positioning, the pilgrimage took on a spiritual, political, and psychological emphasis. From a moral perspective, the pilgrimage was “to demonstrate in action the spiritual quality and basis of the Negro’s struggle for freedom and equality.” It should emphasize that this struggle for democracy was good for the nation, for its moral growth and “the purity of its social and political institutions.” The pilgrimage should also reinforce upon Negroes a commitment to nonviolence in their struggle. From a political perspective, the action called for law and order to be provided to the Negroes for whom person and property have been repeatedly threatened and damaged. Further, this action provided an opportunity to emphasize to the Negro the importance of registering to vote, even as it made clear to the larger nation “the terror and subterfuge used to deprive the Negro of the right to vote.” From a psychological perspective, the effort provided a constructive outlet for the frustrations of southern Negroes, as it hopefully reduced the possibility of a violent response.140

On May 17, 1957, the third anniversary of the Brown decision, twenty-five thousand demonstrators stood before the Lincoln Memorial as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King delivered a rousing speech titled, “Give Us the Ballot.” In his speech King proclaimed, if given the ballot, “we will quietly and nonviolently, without rancor or bitterness, implement the Supreme Court’s decision of May 17, 1954.” In his speech,

139 Ibid., 186.

140 Ibid., 188–189.
King used four points of emphasis that Bayard had written to him a week earlier. These included the need for a new analysis of the national situation, the struggle for the right to vote, an emphasis on nonviolence, and a rhetorical strategy of “no” with “yes.”

The pilgrimage was extremely successful. Every major and minor Negro leader of substance and allies to the Negro attended: Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Charles Diggs, Paul Douglas, Jacob Javits, A. Phillip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, and Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University. Not only because of the tremendous attendance but also because of the speech and the occasion, King was thrust into the top echelon of African-American leaders. James Hicks of the New York Amsterdam News, New York’s chief African-American newspaper, proclaimed King to be “the top Negro leader.” With this proclamation, Rustin had achieved his goal of promoting into prominence a spiritual leader, grounded in nonviolent direct action.

Additionally, the coordination of the gathering was a dress rehearsal for the March on Washington idea, should it prove necessary in the future. But an unexpected outcome was Hicks’ critique of Wilkins and the NAACP. Hicks accused Wilkins of not throwing his full weight behind the pilgrimage. It was well known that Wilkins was uncomfortable with mass protests as a strategy for change. Hicks went on to say that King could snatch Wilkins’ job from him if he wanted it. Wilkins knew that Hicks had a point, as many chapters of the NAACP across the nation were now trying to snag King as

\[141 \text{ Ibid., 193.} \]
\[142 \text{ Ibid.} \]
a speaker.\textsuperscript{143} Clearly there was tension in who King was and what his mass protests were accomplishing.

The Prayer Pilgrimage completely reinvigorated the SCLC. The power of unity and mass protest was becoming strikingly clear. Yet, for all of the success that Bayard had created, the southern Black ministers did not appreciate him. For them, between Rustin’s sexuality and his radical politics, he was, in their minds, an unpalatable choice for leadership.\textsuperscript{144} Even though he sat in their very midst, their homophobia prevented them from seeing that Rustin had the capacity and agency for international leadership.

In 1959, through a series of maneuvers, Rustin was called upon to provide leadership in the protest against the French decision to explode a nuclear weapon in the Sahara. Charles de Gaulle announced his intention to establish a test site at Reggane, located in the Algerian Sahara. The proposal was an outrage to pacifists, anti-nuclear activists, and Africans everywhere. However, on the African continent at this time, it was Ghana that had the most influence in the matter, having recently extracted itself from colonial rule. The resolved demonstration to address this atrocity was a proposal for an international brigade to converge on the test site.\textsuperscript{145}

Achieving this was no small task because of the complexity of the activists involved, the resources needed to support such an effort, and the remote location of the site. Rustin was called in to organize this effort in October 1959. He began to work his

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 265.

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 271.

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 279.
magic. He was already acquainted with Nkrumah and Gbedemah, the new prime minister and finance minister of Ghana. They became acquainted on Bayard’s first trip to African in 1952. But because the stakeholders in this effort were so numerous, Rustin determined that he would need considerably more time to effectively organize this effort than he originally thought, and so he signaled to the powers back in the United States his intent to stay on work on Sahara project into 1960. This proposal was not well received.\textsuperscript{146}

It seems that, in his absence, most of the civil rights efforts were floundering. Martin King wrote to Stanley Levison regarding Rustin, “We are in desperate need of his service.”\textsuperscript{147} Evidently, King had worked through his concerns regarding Bayard, weighing them against his contributions, and determined that the movement would be better with him than without him. The next major action to be undertaken would be demonstrations at the Democratic and Republican conventions. There was no way that they could succeed without Bayard’s participation. At this juncture, King was ready to offer Bayard a paid position in the SCLC. He also appears to have worked through any reservations that other board members might have regarding Rustin.\textsuperscript{148} In the midst of this anticipated reunion, two unexpected events occurred.

On February 1, 1960, four African-American college students entered a Whites-only lunch counter at a Woolworth store in Greensboro, North Carolina, each requesting a cup of coffee. When service was subsequently refused, the students sat quietly, simply

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 283.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 288–289.
waiting to be served. This simple act became a new student-led tactic, adding to the strategies of peaceful activists. The student-led civil rights sit-ins were born.\textsuperscript{149}

The sit-in movement erupted spontaneously. By the spring of 1960, more than one hundred cities had been affected, yielding the arrest of several thousand youthful protesters and the resulting violent counter-demonstrations of Whites, all of which made media headlines across the nation. The sit-in was a direct-action, confrontational tactic deemed far more dramatic than the bus boycott five years prior. Whereas the bus boycott centered on an act of withholding, the sit-in provided the opportunity for young Black students and their allies to put their bodies on the line as a challenge to racial degradation, discrimination, and second-class citizenship.

There was, of course, White backlash: lit cigarettes were gouged into the backs of protesters, while food and beverages were often dumped over their heads and into their laps.\textsuperscript{150} In Orangeburg, police responded to the demonstrators with tear gas. In Nashville, the home of the one Black city council member was bombed. In Marshall, Texas, fire hoses were employed.\textsuperscript{151} Nevertheless, the movement continued across the South—at a rapid pace! This rapid growth in the movement can be attributed in part to social and family networks among southern Blacks. When sit-ins occurred in one place, students would call friends and relatives in nearby towns, spreading the word in advance of the


\textsuperscript{150} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{151} D’Emilio, \textit{Lost Prophet}, 291.
local media. Young people in the newly alerted vicinity would then initiate their own demonstrations. It is important to note that this student-inspired direct action occurred organically, without the executive leadership of the SCLC or any other organization.

About this same time, King left Birmingham and returned to Atlanta to serve Ebenezer Baptist Church and his father as assistant pastor. However, Alabama was not through with Martin Luther King, Jr. Alabama officials indicted King on charges that he lied on his state tax returns. The officials chose to frame the offense as perjury, a felony, for which King, if convicted, could be sentenced to serve time in prison for up to ten years.¹⁵² Needless to say, this would never happen if Bayard Rustin had anything to say about it—and he did!

Rustin, fully perceiving the seriousness of the indictment yet fully aware of the larger political milieu of the movement, saw an opportunity to fuse these two major occurrences. Within two weeks of the indictment, Rustin had formed the Committee to Defend Martin Luther King. Amassing the usual suspects of his New York activists and beyond, he engaged Harry Belafonte to form a committee to mobilize celebrities in the entertainment industry committed to civil rights. Rustin broadened the goals of the defense committee to raise monies not only for the trial but also to support the SCLC. Rustin gathered the mailing addresses of every organization to which King had lent his name in support of their efforts. At the same time, Belafonte’s committee conducted several events, including concerts and major affairs in Harlem and Los Angeles.¹⁵³

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 292.
Rustin took out a full-page ad in the *New York Times*, where he linked the direct actions of young Black students in the sit-in movement to the source of their inspiration—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The ad read, in part:

Thousands of Southern Negro students are engaged in widespread nonviolent demonstrations in positive affirmation of the right to live in human dignity .... They are being met by an unprecedented wave of terror .... Small wonder that the Southern violators of the Constitution fear this new, nonviolent brand of freedom fighter .... Small wonder that they are determined to destroy the one man who, more than any other, symbolizes the new spirit now sweeping the South .... The defense of Martin Luther King, spiritual leader of the student sit-in movement, clearly, therefore, is an integral part of the total struggle for freedom in the South.154

Signatories included the likes of Marlon Brando, Shelley Winters, and Stella Adler from among White actors. Among African-American entertainers lending their signatures were Nat King Cole, Dorothy Dandridge, Sammy Davis Jr., Lorraine Hansberry, Langston Hughes, Mahalia Jackson, Eartha Kitt, Sidney Poitier, and Jackie Robinson.155

Rustin’s labor on behalf of King and the SCLC, coupled with these new, exciting student sit-in demonstrations, caused rancor among some civil rights leaders, especially those of the NAACP. As is often the case among nonprofit entities, competition for recognition and for dollars is not uncommon. Rustin’s work among the celebrities, and their continuing output of support for King, proved a great frustration for Wilkins. He was being bombarded with rumors that a new civil rights organization was being formed, which would conduct a national membership drive in direct competition with the

154 Ibid.

155 Ibid., 292-293.
NAACP, with Bayard Rustin as its executive director. However, not every biographer views Rustin as vital to King or to the movement.

In his biography of King, David J. Garrow seeks to portray Martin as having wrestled intellectually with Gandhian thought, noting that King read extensively on Gandhi in his studies at the University of Boston. Garrow places Rustin’s arrival in February 1953, just as the indictments were being issued. However, he does not credit Rustin with any significant accomplishments and within a few paragraphs discusses the broad concern that Rustin leave Montgomery as soon as possible. Garrow notes that the Rev. Glenn E. Smiley, a staff person of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, came to Montgomery on February 17. It is Smiley whom Garrow credits as the major Gandhian influence on King. Garrow writes that Smiley brought a book on nonviolence to King, stating that it was Smiley who confronted King about his deficit understanding of Gandhian thought, that it was Smiley who began to engage King on this subject matter, that it was Smiley who believed that God had called King to lead a great movement in the South. It was, according to Garrow, Smiley who believed King could become a “Negro Gandhi.” From Garrow’s perspective, Rustin’s primary interest was to create a southern strategy that would spread the message of Montgomery throughout the region.

156 Ibid., 295-296.


158 Ibid., 108–110.
Garrow is free to hold his opinion, but the preponderance of the evidence suggests otherwise.

Contrary to Garrow’s account, as we have already demonstrated, Rustin made significant contributions upon his arrival in Montgomery. Garrow suggests that King had read extensively regarding Gandhian thought at the University of Boston, where he entered in September 1951. King himself disputes Garrow’s chronology, pointing out that he heard Howard University President Mordecai Johnson, who had recently returned from India, preach on Gandhian theory in 1950. King says he immediately bought “a half dozen books” on Gandhi and his life. King discusses Gandhian theory and its influence in Stride Toward Freedom, but in conjunction with several other theorists.\(^{159}\)

Garrow’s argument is fraught with other contradictions as well. He says that King read extensively while at the University of Boston, but then he points to a single book, one that Smiley gave to King, that informed King of his deficit understanding of Gandhian theory. Which is it? One undisputed fact is that, if King was extensively knowledgeable regarding Gandhian theory, he was not practicing it when Rustin showed up. Further, the primary issue facing King and the movement was not just understanding the theory, but also the ability to translate the theory into practice in the context of Montgomery. Garrow does not provide support as to where Smiley would have gained this level of understanding and insight. As has been pointed out, Rustin studied Gandhian nonviolent protest in India, which in part was why he was selected to assist in Mont-

gomery. Finally, the majority of historians mention Smiley in the Montgomery context, but he does not appear to have been a long-term contributor to King’s evolution. It is not clear why Garrow would choose to diminish Rustin’s significant contributions to King, but there is minimal support for his version of the narrative.

**Separating the Inseparable**

It is well documented that Adam Clayton Powell Jr, contrived a threat of sexual scandal leading to the severing of the relationship between King and Rustin for three years, from 1960 to 1963. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. was a dominating, cis, Black male patriarch, a brilliant synthesizer, and a master strategist who had maneuvered his way from a church of significance in Harlem into the United States Senate. Among Black people, he was the man to go to! Powell was twenty-one years older than King and had plowed his way into power—though if the truth be told, he was born into a substantive level of power. The NAACP was no threat. It was an organization dependent upon memberships and contributions. The Abyssinian church represented a potential resource for both. Besides, the NAACP is an institution, not an individual. As the sole African-American senator and a leading contributor to the broadening of African-American consciousness, Powell Jr. had never before experienced any real competition at the national level. King was the first competitor of equal prowess, intensifying his status through gaining national attention. To read the narratives of Powell Jr.’s actions and strategies is to understand clearly the threat that Powell felt King represented to him.

King and A. Phillip Randolph had planned to stage civil rights marches at the 1960 Democratic and Republican conventions. Their intent was to apply sufficient pressure to both parties to ensure that the civil rights issue gained a prominent position in
each party’s platform and to commit prospective candidates to those positions. They did not consult with Adam Clayton Powell Jr. regarding this strategy, and Powell was in fact opposed to their efforts. But Powell, fully recognizing the movement’s power and authority relative to civil rights, had to be cautious in his approach. He could not attack A. Phillip Randolph directly, as Randolph was revered and above reproach. Any personal attack toward him would certainly backfire. He could not attack King directly, as he was now clearly viewed as the primary leader of the movement. But Bayard was vulnerable to attack, and through him Powell could teach a lesson to both of his opponents. On June 25, 1960, Powell released a statement suggesting that the Civil Rights Movement, and King in particular, had been under “undue influences,” beginning when Rustin went to Montgomery to assist with the boycott.

Powell’s action was also influenced by White Democratic congressional members, who felt that they had achieved great electoral momentum as a result of the 1958 elections. From their perspective, protest confrontations at their convention might bring a halt to this momentum. Simply put, they did not need and did not want to see confrontation at the convention. Powell Jr. decided to intervene in the situation. Before going to Los Angeles, the site of the 1960 Democratic convention, Powell Jr. placed a call to Bayard Rustin. He told Rustin that if King did not call off the civil right marches, he would announce to the world that Rustin and King were sexually involved.

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161 Levine, *Bayard Rustin*, 120-121.

sexual expression was public knowledge. King, who was not homosexual, was upset and worried about the impact of such a charge. Upon hearing of the threat, King asked Randolph to accede to Powell Jr.’s demand and cancel the civil rights marches. Randolph refused.  

Rustin, sensitive to King’s intense fear and discomfort over the threat, agreed to disassociate himself from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and King. Rustin submitted his letter of resignation. It was not, however, his expectation that King would accept this offer. To his chagrin, King accepted it—without reservation. Rustin was furious. From Rustin’s perspective, King “knew goddamn well the he [Powell] couldn’t have that kind of information; you can’t sleep with a guy without his knowing it.” This was one of the most painful experiences of Rustin’s career. Needless to say, he was as angry toward King for buckling under an unfounded threat as he was toward Powell Jr. Rustin lost respect for Powell Jr. On the other hand, Powell Jr. considered the ploy successful because it dislodged the relationship between Rustin and King. The civil rights demonstrations at the conventions proceeded as planned, although it should be noted that they were not as impactful as they would have been under Bayard’s leadership.

163 Hamilton, American Dilemma, 336.
164 D’Emilio, Lost Prophet, 298.
165 Ibid., 337.
166 Rustin, I Must Resist, 241
The context and subsequent decision of King to accept Rustin’s resignation are murky at best. There are indications that, at this same time, King was involved in a major challenge to the conservative leadership of the National Baptist Convention. Evidently one of King’s lieutenants in that fight was also gay. It was reported that King was caught between the two challenges, with gay men visibly present in each instance, and King was overwhelmed as to which gay man to support. With the lieutenant in the National Baptist Convention fight unidentified, one cannot speculate why King chose to support him rather than Bayard. However, there is also another consideration—King’s own sexual indiscretions. If Powell put out the rumor that King was having an affair with Rustin, King’s sexuality as an area of investigation would become public fodder. King’s personal risk was that Powell’s false rumor might unearth and bring to public knowledge King’s various affairs with women. While not as explosive as a homosexual tryst, the irrefutable evidence of immorality by a moral leader such as King would yield irreparable damage to his person, his family, and the movement. Powell had, in effect, placed Rustin on a political bubble that could not sustain his weight. It is most probable that King felt that he had no other choice. For three years, King operated from this perspective, until the vision for the March on Washington began to crystalize.


The March on Washington

The 1963 March on Washington was the collaborative effort of every major civil rights organization: the Negro American Labor Council, Congress on Racial Equality, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the National Urban League. Framed as a centennial celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation, its intent was to accentuate how little social and political progress had been attained in racial equality in one hundred years.\textsuperscript{169} Beyond the vast differences in strategies that these organizations employed, openness to compromise prevailed and support for the march was achieved, an effort that was substantially strengthened daily by the televised events of Birmingham and the brutality exemplified by Eugene “Bull” Connor’s effort to maintain segregation. The question now on the table for these civil rights leaders was who would coordinate this effort.

The idea for the march had come from A. Phillip Randolph, and there was the general consensus that his organization would take the lead. When Rustin’s name came up for discussion, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP objected to his appointment. Wilkins, fully acknowledging Rustin’s brilliance, recounted his history, from his communist associations in his youth to the issues surrounding his sexuality. But again the spirit of compromise prevailed, and A. Phillip Randolph was named official director of the march,

with Bayard Rustin as his deputy assistant.\textsuperscript{170} The mandate was to mobilize at least one hundred thousand people from across the nation to the nation’s capital, arriving at six o’clock a.m. and leaving by six o’clock p.m. on the same day, without incident! It was a task only Rustin could accomplish, and a task he accomplished successfully. In fact, while the total number of attendees is disputed, estimates range from two hundred fifty thousand to four hundred thousand persons.\textsuperscript{171} The planning and structuring of this event not only reunited Rustin and King, but also proved it to be the largest mass protest in American history until the Women’s March of January 21, 2017.

Fourteen months later, Martin Luther King Jr. would be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Forty individuals were invited to accompany King to Oslo. Chief of logistics for the group was Bayard Rustin. Bayard not only coordinated the trip to Oslo but also helped King prepare his acceptance speech. With these tasks completed, Rustin coordinated the group’s victory visits to Stockholm and London. Upon the group’s return to the states that December, Ralph Bunche, the first African American to receive the Nobel Prize, hosted a reception for King at the United Nations, with Robert Kennedy in attendance.\textsuperscript{172} In the final analysis, King’s capacity for leadership proved to be all that—and perhaps even more than—Rustin had envisioned in Montgomery.

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\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., 248.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 257.
\textsuperscript{172} Levine, \textit{Bayard Rustin}, 171-172.
Chapter 3:

Of Ebed-Melech, the Prophet, and the King

*I didn’t do writing ... but He signed my name.*
—Traditional

Now when Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, one of the eunuchs which was in the king’s house, heard that they had put Jeremiah in the dungeon, the king then sitting in the gate of Benjamin, Ebed-Melech went forth out of the king’s house. (Jer. 38:7-8a, KJV)

Subjugated Religious Textual History

If you ask Ethiopians, they will tell you that Ebed-Melech descended from the initial encounter between members of the entourage of the Queen of Sheba and the court of King Solomon (1 Kings 10:1–13). While not among the privileged biblical narratives, this encounter is recorded in both the Hebrew Bible and the Kebra Nagast: The Glory of the Kings of Ethiopia, a 14th century Ethiopian account that traces their national lineage to King Solomon.\(^{173}\) The story is of an ambitious and inquisitive Black queen who valued wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. She was the queen of both Ethiopia and Sheba. In her Ethiopian kingdom was a wealthy courtier, heavily invested in the business of

\(^{173}\) E. A. Wallis Budge, trans., *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyelek (I), being the “Book of the Glory of Kings”* (Kebra Nagast) a work which is alike the traditional history of the establishment of the religion of the Hebrews in Ethiopia, and the patent of sovereignty which is now universally accepted in Abyssinia as the symbol of the divine authority to rule which the kings of the Solomonic line claimed to have received through their descent from the house of David (London, Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1932). http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/kn/.
merchandise and trade. The courtier, Tâmrîn by name, is said to have owned seventy-three shipping vessels and was the primary exporter in charge of trading transactions for his monarch, the Queen of Sheba. Ethiopia’s primary exports at this time were gold and silver.

In this same time period, Solomon, king of Israel, was building a temple for Yahweh. Solomon and his merchants were navigating the Red Sea in search of similar items: gold, other precious metals, and wood for pillars. Solomon and Tâmrîn encountered each other in the process of commerce as the merchant brought many of these items to Jerusalem in trade. Upon return to his own country, Tâmrîn told the queen of the glory and majesty of Israel and King Solomon. Tâmrîn relayed that he was perhaps the wisest man living upon the face of the earth.

No more need be said for the queen. In her heart, she was already establishing a throne for him, and the task of meeting him was moving from a place of determination to destiny. In a very short period of time, Queen Makeda, the virgin queen of Axum and Sheba, set out to make the one-thousand-mile journey to Jerusalem. The queen stayed in Jerusalem for six months, and from her union with King Solomon produced a male child, who was born during her return trip to Axum. Menelik I is considered to have established the royal lineage of Solomonic rule in Ethiopia. When the male child came of age, Queen Makeda abdicated the throne, and Menelik I was crowned “king of kings.”

If one can imagine that there were more unions in Solomon’s court that resulted from broader encounters than just that of the king and queen, then it is possible that Ebed-Melech was a descendant of this lineage, for there is a royal element regarding his personage. There is a vast intellectual difference between the leadership model he employs and the subjugated position in which he serves. What accounts for this variance? I submit that when one summarizes the breadth of the agency, discernment, creativity, self-knowledge, liminality, and compassion that Ebed-Melech displays, it is clear that we are engaging a profoundly gifted leader—a Black queer man whose decision-making prowess, art of persuasion, and queer leadership is affirmed by Yahweh (Jer. 39). Further, the breadth and depth of this skill set could hardly be claimed as innate. Rather, its visibility and the state of maturity he exemplifies suggest a process of experience, growth, and human cognitive development that has evolved over time.

**Grappling for a Contextual Framework**

Ebed-Melech, the Ethiopian eunuch, is an developed leader of extraordinary magnitude when we are introduced to him. When we meet him, his position may be interpreted as a subaltern functioning in the monarchy of Judah. Judah at this time was a vassal state under the political dominance of Babylon. As we shall see, Ebed-Melech, as chief eunuch over the king’s household, retains an advanced position of power and influence. He holds this position in the vassal nation state of Judah to which he is a foreigner—no simple task. This noteworthy accomplishment should not be readily overlooked. Such an accomplishment is the result of an individual having engaged in a process of personal emotional and intellectual investigation—a process essential to transformation through which any subaltern must pass in order to arrive at an initial
position of self-knowledge, itself a prerequisite to any position of leadership. This same transformative process long precedes self-actualization, the achieving of the greater self, leading to that attainment and/or purpose for which the individual believes they were created.\footnote{175}

Institutional racism as we define it and understand its functioning in modern Western society did not exist in 587 BCE. However, ethnocentrism, racial prejudice, xenophobia, and forms of hostility toward foreigners, strangers, and the “other” have existed in all societies, historical and contemporary.\footnote{176} Also present was the historical power relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. These factors are well-established, and Judah in 587 BCE was no exception. In fact, it is the practice and knowledge of the colonizer and the colonized relationship that generated the pervasive fear that permeates the book of Jeremiah: the loss of the kingdom—a sociopolitical diminishing from privilege to servitude. My point is not historical but rather a structural argument regarding dominance. As Judah was subject to Neo-Assyria and subsequently Babylon, so Ebed-Melech was subject to Zedekiah; yet his agency, liminality, and independence are in contradiction to his subaltern position.

Albert Memmi provides an in-depth understanding of the colonizer/colonized power dynamic and the process of negation. This process is critical to the colonizer/colonized relationship. Memmi stresses both the mythical and the constitutive nature of

\footnote{175} Monges, “The Queen of Sheba and Solomon,” 235-246.

this process when he explains the necessity of the portrait of the colonized as “lazy.” This portrayal, in turn, justifies the industrious portrait of the colonizer. This construction includes the suggestion that employing the colonized is not a profitable endeavor, which in turn justifies their cheap, inequitable, or nonexistent wages. To the description of “lazy,” the colonizer adds “wicked,” “backward,” “weak,” “thievish,” “evil,” and “sadistic,” all of which necessitate protective forces such as a police force—subject to the colonizer’s command.

For Memmi, the colonized are of little value to the colonizer. There is little incentive to understand the colonized as he is. Rather, the larger emphasis is to engage the colonized in a prescribed process of psychological change. Memmi suggests that this process is comprised of a series of negations—“the colonized is not this and is not that!” The colonized is never portrayed in a positive light. To this negation, the colonizer adds what Memmi calls the “mark of the plural.” The colonized is never characterized as just an individual, but rather as an “anonymous collectivity, i.e., they are all the same.” To this list of treatments must be added the denial of liberty. For the colonized, there is no way out—neither legalization as in naturalization as a process toward humanness nor religion as a process of conversion.

Memmi concludes that, at the end of this process, the colonized, the subaltern, is barely human. He exists only as a function of the needs of the colonizer. If the colonizer

178 Ibid., 82.
179 Ibid., 83–85.
is successful, he transforms the colonized into a state of radical psychological coloniza-
tion. However, the resulting characteristic levels of negative indoctrination or internalized
self-hatred are not what we see in the persona of Ebed-Melech. This raises the question:
How might he have escaped or negated such a process so central to colonization?

**Self-Love**

One method of relinquishing the negativities of internalized self-hatred is to enter
into a process of self-love. This is certainly an approach espoused by African-American
preachers historically and currently. Toni Morrison broadens the cultural understanding
of this transformative power of engagement in *Beloved*, as she has Baby Suggs
prophetically preach a transcending message in “the Clearing.”

Teresa N. Washington explores Morrison’s novel through a Yoruba hermeneutic.
Washington defines Ṣẹjẹ as a spiritual force that is understood to be “inherent in Africana
women.” African women possessing Ṣẹjẹ, while often erroneously called witches, are in
fact “astrally-inclined human beings who enforce earthly and cosmic laws.” Washington
views Baby Suggs as such a woman and even more so. She describes Baby Suggs as the
communal mother of her community. Additionally, Washington ascribes to Suggs Ṣẹjẹ, the
power of the word. To actualize this power, Baby Suggs brings the community to “the
Clearing,” a place that Washington equates to the sacred spiritual groves of Central and
West Africa. The Clearing is holy ground or, as Baby Suggs calls it, the “Ground of all
Once the community is assembled and the appointed time has come, dropping her walking cane she shouts,

“Let the children come!” and they ran from the trees toward her.  
“Let your mothers hear you laugh,” she told them ....  
Then “Let the grown men come,” she shouted ....  
“Let your wives and your children see you dance,” she told them ....  
Finally she called the women to her. “Cry,” she told them. “For the living and the dead. Just cry.” ...

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women, and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath.181

It is after this cathartic encounter of juba—the confluence of song, dance, prayer, lamentation, and exultation—that the community is now in a place to receive “a spiritual charge that transforms into a unified whole the few things that the Clearing participants dare lay claim—their bodies and their spirits and, most fragile, their love.” It is at this juncture that Baby Suggs offers her Òrò—her word power:

Here, … in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder [pointing to other side of the Ohio River where slavery is legal] they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, … stroke them on your face ‘cause they don’t love that either. You got to love it, you!182
Baby Suggs’ words differ little from the primary messages of African-American preachers of her generation and ours. They serve as a counterforce in African-American consciousness to the massive numbers of negations and micro-aggressions inflicted upon the community, by others and by ourselves, on a daily basis. Shaped by blackness, our choice is either to revere it or to wear it as a stigma. The writer and social critic bell hooks advises African Americans to ascribe to a healthy model of agency and self-actualization, one that operates from a foundational understanding that, when we love ourselves well, only then are we able to love others.  

Abdul JanMohamed provides us with some understanding of the necessity of this prerequisite process of self-love as he plumbs the depths of Richard Wright’s autobiography, Black Boy, to expose the societal forces of Jim Crow: enforceable laws and behaviors relegating African Americans to subaltern positions of existence, post-emancipation. These codes and traditions of southern hegemony seek to position Wright somewhere between “social death” and suicide. Similar to Memmi’s analysis, for the colonized, or subaltern, there is no way out! These daily, operative forces are purposefully designed to limit Black maturation to that of “a sub-human creature devoid of initiative and entirely compliant to the will of White supremacy.”  

The author suggests that the systemic creation of categories of minorities is rooted in an intent to negate. Further, the desired goal of this construct is twofold. First, the intent of discrimination is

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183 hooks, Salvation, 41.  
to obscure the individual’s potential as a human being. Second, it is to obfuscate any idea the individual might have toward achieving a position of leadership, among their own people or in the larger society. The self-confidence essential to leadership, can be acquired successfully only through the negation of these crippling forces.

JanMohamed suggests that Wright develops a process of investigation that allows every tool of discrimination to be fully felt, examined, and ultimately negated. For example, Jim Crow laws forbade African Americans from reading. To this end, African Americans could not hold library cards or borrow books from public libraries. Wright, employing his creativity, develops a narrative of resistance to this limitation. However, rather than relishing his capacity to outmaneuver the system, Wright holds up this negation of his personage, absorbing the pain with full consciousness and analyzing its purpose and goal in the larger framework of Jim Crow, before he fully negates its power to diminish him.185

Wright engages in this painful and extensive process with every act of discrimination that he encounters in order to more fully understand the breadth and scope of each discriminative act and its formative power. His goal is to understand more fully how such an insidious construct seeks to alter, shape, and create a subaltern, whose desired end is eventual capitulation, becoming self-limiting in thought, status, and agency, thereby devolving to a place of complicity in one’s own oppression.186 Having arrived at this

185 Ibid., 261.
186 Ibid., 247.
state, from the perspective of the dominating society, brute force to maintain subservience can temporarily be commuted.

JanMohamed records one of Wright’s opportunities for a change of status when he is retained as a skilled employee at an optical company. Wright is hired by a well-intentioned, progressive northerner. His employer, however, did not have the buy-in of his White employees, who resented Wright’s attempt to desegregate their professional work environment. The White workers, seeking to maintain their sense of social order, place Wright in a double bind by falsely accusing him of not appropriately addressing a White man as mister, even as they arranged a physical beating for Wright and threatened his life. When the owner openly asks Wright to name the assailant, Wright is so fearful and feels so fully ensnared in this losing situation that he cannot speak and is reduced to tears. He subsequently resigns. The greater pain of this situation for Wright is his own complicity in his subjugation.187

Wright understood that from the hegemonic perspective, “the black boy must be taught to reify himself and the world; that is, he must perceive his liminality and the social and political restrictions that surround him not as the historical products of social relations but as natural and even metaphysical facts.”188 Here the term “reify” is utilized in the Marxist sense of “thing-making.” The challenge of Black male longevity is a capacity to engage in “new thing-making”—that is, to nurture an ongoing capacity to

187 Ibid., 256.
188 Ibid., 255.
recreate oneself afresh given the limitations and the opportunities available at any given season of one’s life.

As a bulwark of resistance and counter-narrative, however, Wright learns to gain strength from opposition even as he finds virtue in negation. Somewhere in his mind, he maintains a consciousness of open possibilities, always remembering the larger horizon and viewing freedom in the face of demands for subjugation. Using these intellectual and emotional tools to combat the social and political death of Jim Crow, Wright places beneath his feet its prescribed sense of powerlessness and status of dishonor.\(^\text{189}\)

Wright ultimately escapes these forces through a process of negating the negation. Similarly, if one engages a full consideration of the personage and mindset of Ebed-Melech, it becomes obvious that he has already undergone a liberative process prior to the episode of Jeremiah’s incarceration. Several facets of the narrative support this understanding, as we will see.

**Ebed-Melech’s Agency**

At first glance, Ebed-Melech’s overt self-confidence could be interpreted as support for the Ethiopian position. He may well be a descendant of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (Jer. 38:7-8). Given that understanding, Ebed-Melech could possibly be royalty. Piotr O. Scholz, in his book, *Eunuchs and Castrati*, alerts us to a unique practice within the monarchy regarding the treatment of males born of concubines and fathered by the king. Should this male heir possess strong leadership qualities, such as we see in

\(^{189}\) Ibid., 248.
Ebed-Melech, or be perceived as a threat to the legitimate heirs, rather than killing this male child, castration is presented as an option. Should the child survive castration, he may then serve in a position of authority within the kingdom, but his castration prevents his ascension to the throne. Ebed-Melech may represent such an example. His life is spared by the stroke of a knife. If he is royalty, it also explains the high level of his personal empowerment. When he talks to the king he might well be talking to his father or his uncle. It supports his liminality and explains his intimacy with King Zedekiah (Jer. 38:8-9). If he is royalty, his rearing would have bent toward privilege and not servitude.

When we meet him, Ebed-Melech is living in the king’s house. For a male to be housed in the same location as the queen mother and the king’s concubines provides us with some insights into the unique attributes of this “servant of the king.” A male so situated must have a capacity to protect the precious and virtuous humanity housed within the palace walls from all outside forces. This capacity suggests a male with a strong and potentially threatening masculine performance. At the same time, however, his performance of masculinity can be no threat to the vulnerability of these women who are the sexual companions of the king. While there might be some variability regarding the virtuousness of the concubines, the sanctity of the queen mother cannot be disputed.

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190 Liminality is defined as the capacity to cross many varying thresholds and return on good terms. Within the biblical text Ebed-Melech moves across the landscape of Jerusalem without permission, appearing unrestricted by boundaries.
From her womb comes the truest royal lineage of the king and, therefore, the kingdom.\textsuperscript{191} As it pertains to the purity of that lineage there can be no dispute. Ebed-Melech has evolved into this position of responsibility because he has actively engaged the process of self-actualization, portraying an effective masculine performance and demonstrating a capacity for discernment and agency, the combination of which earned him the trust of the king (Jer. 38:7-10). And yet, that he is a non-procreative male is no small matter and must also be figured into this calculation.\textsuperscript{192} Janet C. Everhart supports the idea that eunuchs are often located near women who are relatives of the king.\textsuperscript{193} Christl Maier, however, comes much closer to the true character and position of Ebed-Melech when she identifies him as master of the king’s house.\textsuperscript{194}

Ebed-Melech, servant of the king, master of the king’s house, appears to successfully maintain his position through a highly effective social networking system that keeps


\textsuperscript{192} Janet C. Everhart, “The Hidden Eunuchs of the Hebrew Bible: Uncovering an Alternate Gender” (PhD dissertation, Iliff School of Theology and University of Denver, 2003). In chapter two, Everhart compares Neo-Assyrian (NA) eunuchs with the eunuchs of the Hebrew Bible. She supports this comparison through the semantic links between the NA word “sa resi” with the Hebrew word “saris.” Also, she documents substantial contact between Neo-Assyria and Israel during the eighth to sixth centuries.

\textsuperscript{193} Ibid., 79.

him informed. He was in the king’s house when he heard of the plight of Jeremiah. In other words, Ebed-Melech, who manages the king’s house and the king’s women, was at home when a member or members of his social networking system alerted him to Jeremiah’s incarceration. This information being brought to him implies at least two possibilities: 1) for some unarticulated reason, it is important for him to know of this development; and 2) it is the belief of the provider of this information that Ebed-Melech has the potential or present capacity to impact this situation.

It is possible that this networking system developed as a result of the various messages that Ebed-Melech relayed to and for the king, demanding that he cross numerous and varied portals. The role of messenger is a well-established function of a eunuch. This also implies that Ebed-Melech possesses and employs the attribute of liminality, which is also often noted among eunuchs throughout the ages.195 It is an ability to cross many thresholds and engage many voices and is no doubt related to the perception of him as non-threatening. What makes Ebed-Melech’s network worth noting is that it appears to be intact at a time when communication throughout Jerusalem has become disrupted. Dependable truth can hardly be found by anyone, not even by the king.196 In fact, many scholars (Stulman, Carroll, Bright, and Brueggemann)197 believe


196 “Is there any word from the LORD?” (Jeremiah 37:17).

that the disjointed nature of the book of Jeremiah is a literary device utilized to reflect the disruptive context of the time. Yet Ebed-Melech’s network of communication is alive and accurate. It is of interest that he receives sound and pertinent information during this period of significant instability and chaos. The information is sufficiently sound for him to become involved in what is clearly the second most pressing political, social, and theological issue facing the nation of Judah. The royal decision to incarcerate and ultimately kill a prophet of Yahweh was a matter of great and grave significance.

Further, there is every indication that the Ebed-Melech tested the validity of this information before presenting his findings to the king; verification of truth is Politics 101 in any century. All indications point in that direction, for as the narrative unfolds it becomes clear that Ebed-Melech knows in great depth Jeremiah’s condition long before the narrator physically places him at the scene of the prophet’s incarceration. An example of this foreknowledge is displayed when in preparing the of rescue Jeremiah, Ebed-Melech stops off at the room of royal garment storage and retrieves a few bulky items which he later gives to Jeremiah to protect his skin from rope burns. Why did Ebed-Melech take this detour? How would he have known that Jeremiah was deeply sunk in the mire? What made him think that Jeremiah was so deeply sunk that it would take a significant effort of strength to extract him from the mire—an effort of strength that might in fact injure the prophet? A single look into the cistern resolves all of these questions (Jer. 38: 11-12).

Equally intriguing is the question why Ebed-Melech thinks he can successfully enter into this matter. What self-understanding brings him to the conclusion that he can positively influence this situation without penalty of death? What certainty allows him to
rise above his fear and advocate for an incarcerated Jeremiah and demonstratively stand against the actualized will of the princes of Judah? Perhaps one contributing factor is that he had already passed from death to life. 198

Ebed-Melech survives and transcends the disabling act of castration perpetrated upon his body, an act synonymous with death. It is not clear whether this act was purposefully done to position Ebed-Melech for a particular service such as guarding a harem or grooming him for some administrative position within a court. What is well documented, however, are the two methods of castration: removal of the testicles or removal of both testicles and the penis. In ancient times, according to some figures, it is estimated that only one in five persons survived. Survival rates and surgical outcomes varied depending on the age of the subject and the degree and clinical conditions of the surgery. Conversely, castrations could also be a punishment as reflected in the Code of Hammurabi (c. 1700 BCE). 199 A third alternative, as mentioned previously and many Orthodox Ethiopians believe regarding Ebed-Melech, occurs as a result of concubinage and the presence of many “ladies of the palace” and their children. It is suggested that if the children of concubines are viewed as threats to the true heirs of the royal lineage, a compromise can be proposed. That male child, deemed a threat, can undergo castration and be guaranteed a senior position at court, thereby avoiding execution. 200

198 Scholz, Eunuchs and Castrati, 16.
199 Ibid., 16–17.
200 Ibid., 72.
The larger point here is that Ebed-Melech is a survivor of a harrowing act of violence upon his body, an act synonymous with death, yet he has transformed it into an attribute—an attribute of liminality. An emasculated man incapable of inseminating a woman, not necessarily a male without a penis as we have previously determined, is no threat to the lineage of the house of David. Suffice to say that, at this juncture, Judahites have identified him as a eunuch, a type of third sex, and the king has determined him to be no threat. Ebed-Melech, in turn, has capitalized upon this perception, transforming Judah’s non-threatening gaze upon him into the viability of liminality.

Defining the Queer

Ebed-Melech is a queer, Ethiopian/Black male, externally “othered.” Yet he is, as we will continuously discover, a political change agent of tremendous influence within this vassal nation to which he is a foreigner. He arrives at this critically influential position not only without any political portfolio that we can ascertain but also without ecclesiastical standing—as one who is forbidden to stand in the congregation of the Temple of Yahweh.201 It is clear from the onset that Ebed-Melech is no ordinary “servant of the king.”202 He knows something. He possesses something. He has capacity for the circumstance in which he finds himself. The king has already consented to Jeremiah’s incarceration and probable death,203 yet this servant of the king discerns that salvation for

201 Deuteronomy 23:1.
202 Ebed-Melech means “servant of the king.”
203 Carroll, Jeremiah, 682.
Jeremiah is still possible. The more one learns of Ebed-Melech, the greater there emerges an operative disconnect between the narrator’s initial descriptors and the influence and attributes of leadership he displays. He is not just Ethiopian/Black, and he is not just castrated and queer.

As previously mentioned, we define “queer” as an inclusive term for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered persons. It includes all persons whose sexual expressions are outside of the general Western construct of heterosexual normativity. Ken Stone traces the American history of the term “queer,” placing its emergence in New York City between the late nineteenth century and World War II. Stone records that there were two primary descriptive groups of men who engaged in same-sex activity. The first group was referred to as “fairies,” while the second group was referred to as “normal masculine men.” “Fairies” were men who tended to express themselves through more feminine, passive sensibilities and affects and were considered to be the primary providers of oral and anal sex. “Normal masculine men,” Stone says, were men who “generally enjoyed sexual relations with women, but were also open to obtain sexual pleasure from ‘fairies.’”

Sometime during this period there emerged a third group of males whose description did not fit either category. These were men who were masculine in performance but were open to providing and engaging in a variety of male-to-male sexual activities, both

passive and aggressive. This third group of males, who did not fit the descriptors of fairies or normal males, were referred to as “queer.”205

Angela Bauer-Levesque forthrightly addresses the issue of queerness and the biblical text. First, she acknowledges the lack of chronological order in the book of Jeremiah, agreeing with other major scholars mentioned above. However, she goes on to make a clarifying statement that is central to our argument regarding the gender category of Ebed-Melech. Bauer-Levesque points out that the entire biblical text is written in a mindset that assumes heteropatriarchal normativity.206 In other words, the biblical writers assume that all people are heterosexual unless there is something that places the individuals of their narratives outside of this frame of normativity. Ebed-Melech is queer, then, not because he engages in certain sexual activity; rather, Ebed-Melech is queer because the physicality of his altered genitalia places him outside the framework of heteropatriarchal normativity. This is a salient point, because, from the biblical perspective, a male who might be fully heterosexual in his orientation, if he was unable to inseminate a female, would by strict definition also be considered queer. The same would hold true for an asexual individual. Ebed-Melech is queer because the writers of the book of Jeremiah identify him as queer.

205 Ibid., 15.

Advising the King

Ebed-Melech went forth out of the king’s house, and spake to the king saying, My lord the king, these men have done evil in all that they have done to Jeremiah the prophet, whom they have cast into the dungeon; and he is like to die for hunger in the place where he is: for there is no more bread in the city. Then the king commanded Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, saying, take from hence thirty men with thee, and take up Jeremiah the prophet out of the dungeon, before he die. (Jer. 38:8–10)

Having accepted the call to rescue Jeremiah, Ebed-Melech begins to develop a plan of action. To scale a political wall successfully in opposition to the princes of Judah, the master of the king’s house needs a plan that liberates Jeremiah even as it simultaneously protects his own life (Jer. 39:17). This is not the time for a solitary political move; what is needed is a powerful ally. What Ebed-Melech initially needed was not in the palace. To answer with success the call for rescue, intervene on Jeremiah’s behalf and remain safe himself, the servant of the king discerns the solution to this problem rests on the authority of the king. To this end, apparently without asking leave, exercising his liminality, he proceeds to the king, who is sitting at the Benjamin Gate holding court. Without introduction or being summoned, Ebed-Melech begins to lay out a social justice argument on Jeremiah’s behalf. There is, however, a great dispute regarding precisely what he says to the king.

The Septuagint text states that, without summons or introduction or even a polite greeting to the king, Ebed-Melech walks up to the king as he is holding court at the Benjamin Gate and says, “You have done evil in what you have done to kill this man with hunger.” The Masoretic text includes the polite greeting, “my lord the King,” but goes on to accuse the princes as if the king had no role in this decision. It reads, “These
men have done evil in all that they did to Jeremiah the prophet by casting him into the cistern."  

For our purposes, there is no need to attempt to ascertain which record is more accurate. This discrepancy may well rest in the interpreter’s understanding of the king-servant relationship. Does Ebed-Melech have sufficient relationship with the king to say, “You have done evil,” directly and to the point, or does he need to be polite and accuse others of an action in which the king has participated? When Nathan confronted David, Israel’s first true king, regarding his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah the Hittite, he presented the king with an unjust story that kindled David’s anger and judgment. David became so angry at the injustice portrayed in the story that, without knowing the guilty party, he passed a death sentence against the man. It is at this point of royal condemnation that Nathan revealed to David that he was the man (2 Sam. 12:1-7)!

Ebed-Melech’s words to the king are important because they reflect his role as a character in the narrative even as they imply a depth of relationship with the king. If he could openly say to the king, “what you have done is evil,” it may point to a very deep and personal relationship with the king. Such a relationship is entirely possible, for this servant of the king and his master have an intimate relationship. Ebed-Melech protects the women with whom the king sleeps, knows with whom he has last slept, when and where it took place, and perhaps has prepared both the woman and the very bed on which they slept (Esther 2:9). He may also know who is slated for the next visit. The more polite version of Ebed-Melech’s remarks to king may be viewed as more consistent with

207 Carroll, Jeremiah, 681.
a colonialized mindset. *The Fall of a City* by J. A. Wainwright, with dramatized scenes by Muriel Hardill, offers a more subservient view of Ebed-Melech.²⁰⁸

Additionally, Ebed-Melech has earned a high degree of authority, liminality, and information management. In other words, he appears to have permission to make decisions as he deems appropriate and in the best interest of the kingdom. He leaves his appointed responsibility without reporting to a higher authority. His liminality includes consent to approach the king without summons, invitation, or introduction. Therefore, it is not outside the realm of possibility that he has earned a right to speak to the king in very direct language. To a significant extent, both Ebed-Melech and the king are in the business of information management. The fact that Ebed-Melech speaks directly to the king, and the king hears his language without offense, suggests that both are in the business of information management.

Stuart Lasine, in *Knowing Kings: Knowledge, Power, and Narcissism in the Hebrew Bible*, seeks to move our understanding of King Zedekiah from a simplistic analysis of “consistently weak” to a more complex understanding of royal power and information management. Lasine focuses on biblical kings but includes Near East, Greek, and European kings to outline the paradoxical nature of this royal position. He argues that

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²⁰⁸ Joseph Allen Wainwright, *The Fall of a City: The Book of Jeremiah, with Dramatized Scenes by Muriel Hardill*, Modern Bible Textbooks (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1962), 124. In Wainwright’s view and more particularly that of Hardill, Ebed-Melech rushes into the king bearing the bad news of Jeremiah’s incarceration. In Hardill’s version, Ebed-Melech is immediately scorned by the king for having left his station in the palace. In her version, Ebed-Melech speaks in broken Hebrew; she views the plans for the rescue of Jeremiah as coming solely from the king. She describes Ebed-Melech as “black as the darkness.” There is no mention of the divine blessing.
to be king is to constantly engage in a process of monitoring information. Noting that information comes in many forms, including “gossip, the private-public distinction, loyalty, and scapegoating,” Lasine projects a relationship of dependency between the monarch and his courtiers. While the king externally appears to be autonomous and independently powerful, from an internal perspective the king is almost totally dependent of his courtiers to display their loyalty by sharing information with him.209 If we accept Lasine’s analysis in light of the conversation we have explored between Ebed-Melech and the king, their conversation may very well exemplify Lasine’s point.

Up to this point in the narrative, Zedekiah has not demonstrated an interest or an ability to conceive and implement viable plans. His decision to employ resistance in response to Nebuchadnezzar’s rule, in spite of the prophecies of Jeremiah and the fact that he himself is a puppet king placed in his position by Nebuchadnezzar, displays a serious lack of political judgment. To a significant degree, it is the interpretation by Nebuchadnezzar of Zedekiah’s act of resistance as treason that brought on the siege of Jerusalem. When confronted with the problem of what to do about the effective preaching of Jeremiah throughout the city, he threw up his hands and turned the fate of Jeremiah into the hands of the princes of Judah, proclaiming openly that “the king can do nothing” (Jer. 38:5). Yet, when we come to this act of planning the rescue of Jeremiah, most

commentators suggest that it is Zedekiah who conceives the rescue initiative.\(^{210}\) If this were the case, it suggests a significant turning point in Zedekiah’s character and agency. There is little support in the narrative, prior or subsequent, to support this perspective. It appears more likely that the rescue plan was conceived by Ebed-Melech or at a minimum was the result of negotiations between the king and his servant. What is essential in the development of this rescue strategy is that the plan emerges as an edict uttered by the king. In so doing, the king’s edict provides the authority and political protection that his servant needs to ensure personal survival as well as the survival of the prophet.

This is the plan by edict of the king: Ebed-Melech is given charge of thirty soldiers to assist and protect him as he goes to the cistern of Malchiah, son of Hammenech, in the court of the prison to lift Jeremiah from incarceration.

**Admonishing the Princes**

In “Eunuchs and the Royal Harem in Achaemenid Persia (559-331),” Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones discusses the customs of Hebrew royal courts and informs us that only representatives of the leading Persian families, the king’s wife, and the king’s mother were privileged to appear before the king without summons. All others were required to make a formal request for an audience.\(^ {211}\) While the two royal courts are not the same, there are similarities in royal court structures. I find it interesting that, without summons, Ebed-Melech makes a social justice argument, suggesting to the king that the actions and

\(^{210}\) See, for example, Mark Roncace, *Jeremiah, Zedekiah, and the Fall of Jerusalem: A Study of Prophetic Narrative* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 91.

behavior of the princes of Judah have been evil as it relates to Jeremiah, emphasizing not only the imprisonment of Jeremiah in the cistern but also “all that they have done” (Jer. 38:9).

The primary argument or center of this point of conflict is established in Jer. 38:4-5, where the princes of Judah come to the king and suggest that the prophet Jeremiah should be put to death. From their perspective as loyal nationalists, Jeremiah has committed treason. They suggest that he has been preaching surrender as a political alternative to continued resistance to Babylon. Evidently, Jeremiah has been preaching this word (and political ideology) broadly, in public spaces, to the extent that the princes feel that his words have weakened the hands of the remaining soldiers residing in the city. Such conflict of ideology is treasonous from their perspective and, as such, they ask that Jeremiah be put to death (Jer. 38:4). From their perspective, Jeremiah’s actions are not in the best interest of Judah, but rather to Judah’s detriment, and they question Jeremiah’s intent.

This is not the first conflict between the princess of Judah and the prophet Jeremiah. Chapter 37 records a prior incident, where Jeremiah is prevented from leaving the city when he was thought to be surrendering to the Babylonians. Subsequently, he is turned over to the princes of Judah, who beat him and place him in prison (Jer. 37:15). Perhaps Ebed-Melech is referring to this encounter as well when he says, “all that they have done.” Jeremiah’s placement in the cistern is, in fact, his third imprisonment.212 This

argument of the princes of Judah, nationalism versus assimilation, is a fundamental political conversation that reoccurs throughout the book of Jeremiah and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four. In contrast to the argument of intent offered by the princes, Ebed-Melech offers the king an argument of behavior even as he pleads mercy for the prophet.

Mark Roncace is helpful here as he analyzes Ebed-Melech’s argument. Roncace notes that the servant of the king is clear in his stance of opposition to the officials, referring to them as “these men.” Further, Roncace argues that Ebed-Melech objectifies and depersonalizes the officials in a manner similar to that which they expressed to the king regarding Jeremiah. They referred to the prophet as “this man.” While both allegations incorporate notions of evil, Ebed-Melech’s charge evaluates the officials’ behavior and actions, while the officials attempt to speak to Jeremiah’s attitude and intent.213 Zedekiah could not defend the accusations of the princes against Jeremiah, given Jeremiah’s silence—a deafening silence that sealed his fate. In a similar manner, however, once Ebed-Melech outlines the case in support of Jeremiah; it is the truth of his words, confirmed by the behaviors of “these men,” that sealed his defense. More important than a character’s words is a character’s behavior.

Advancing Liberation

Then the king commanded Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, saying, take from hence thirty men with thee, and take up Jeremiah the prophet out of the dungeon, before he die. So Ebed-Melech took the men with him, and went into the house of the king under the treasury, and took thence old cast clouts and old rotten rags, and let

213 Roncace, Jeremiah, 89.
them down by cords into the dungeon to Jeremiah. And Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian said unto Jeremiah, put now these old cast clouts and rotten rags under thine armholes under the cords. And Jeremiah did so. So they drew up Jeremiah with cords, and took him up out of the dungeon and Jeremiah remained in the court of the prison. (Jer. 38:10–13)

There is no consensus among commentators regarding the effectiveness of Ebed-Melech’s argument in defense of Jeremiah. Roncace points out the limitations of Ebed-Melech’s rhetorical strategy. The argument made is not one of assertions supported by rationales but is more an approach that leaves the situation open-ended, placing all of the authority in Zedekiah’s hand. Roncace suggests that, while Ebed-Melech initiated the meeting with the king, pointing out all of the evil perpetrated by the princes of Judah, he never asked that these officials be punished. In fact, he never asked for Jeremiah to be removed from the cistern. Roncace credits all of the decision-making to the king’s initiative. Yet this open-ended approach may also be viewed as reflecting the deep understanding and intimate relationship between the two men.

Without question, Ebed-Melech understands the king at a very deep level. So familiar is he with the mind of the king that he innately understood the appropriateness of a direct-indirect strategy. Ebed-Melech was direct in updating the king concerning the plight of the prophet, directly asserting the perilous nature of the prophet’s circumstance while indirectly requesting the king’s assistance. Perhaps what we are witnessing is a lesson in speaking truth to power. If we expand upon our earlier discussion of information management, as a courtier, this servant of the king is responsible for keeping the king informed about all current events affecting the nation. The health and status of the nation’s prophet fall well within this category. As a faithful servant of the king, Ebed-Melech was obligated to inform the king of Jeremiah’s status, but not obligated to
suggest to the king how the matter might be solved. Even though their relationship had a
degree of intimacy, there remained a huge power differential, which no wise servant or
underling would overlook. With all subtleties considered, however, Ebed-Melech
achieved his desired outcome—an edict from the king granting him permission to retrieve
Jeremiah from the cistern. Mission almost accomplished.

While it is clear that eunuchs were considered a third sex during the sixth century
BCE, there is very little clarity as to the range of performances of masculinity. In other
words, one cannot speak with assurance to the degree to which Ebed-Melech’s bodily
expressions, mannerisms, and performances of masculinity aligned with the social
expectations of his day. This we do know, however: Ebed-Melech is deemed sufficiently
masculine and authoritative to lead a band of thirty soldiers. With his thirty soldiers and
the liminality afforded him as master of the king’s house, Ebed-Melech sets out to
retrieve Jeremiah.

As he heads toward the court of the guard, he resolves an issue that had been of
concern for some time. If Jeremiah had sunk into the mud, a significant amount of force
could be needed to extract him. If such a high degree of force were needed, he may well
be injured by the coarseness of the ropes let down to extract him. Immediately the
eunuch’s creativity flickers and he gets an idea. He detours ever so slightly, returning to
the king’s house to gather a few of the thicker royal garments and clothes that were no
longer fit to wear. He brings these tatterings with him to the cistern.

Upon arrival, he speaks to the prophet, but not by name or by title. Yet his very
presence speaks volumes. Having arrived, he speaks to the prophet, instructing him to
wrap himself in the garments and cloths, placing them between his flesh and the ropes as
a cushion to prevent any damage to his body. The prophet listens and without response cushions himself, obeying the servant’s instructions; he is then lifted from the cistern without bodily harm. It is in this instance, more than any other, that Ebed-Melech demonstrates the attribute of power tempered by compassion. The servant of the king returns Jeremiah to the court of the prison (Jer. 38:13).

**Attaining the Boon and the Blessing**

Now the word of the LORD came unto Jeremiah, while he was shut up in the court of the prison, saying, Go and speak to Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, saying, Thus saith the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will bring my words upon this city for evil, and not for good; and they shall be accomplished in that day before thee. But I will deliver thee in that day, saith the LORD: and thou shalt not be given into the hand of the men of who thou art afraid. For I will surely deliver thee, and thou shalt not fall by the sword, but thy life shall be for a prey unto thee: because thou has put thy trust in me, saith the LORD. (Jer. 39:15–18)

Sometime after his rescue from the cistern, while still in the court of the prison, Jeremiah receives an oracle from Yahweh—a word from the LORD. This word comes in the same prophetic formula as the many prophecies that Jeremiah has already delivered: “Thus saith the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel.” Yet, it is preceded by instructions to deliver this word to the sole personage of Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian. Yahweh says, tell Ebed-Melech that my plans for Judah have not changed. Jerusalem will be destroyed by the Babylonians, and the temple will be burned to the ground and its protective walls torn down. Further, let him know that he will see the fulfillment of these words with his own eyes. But I, the LORD, make two commitments to him: First, though he will be a witness to great devastation and destruction, I will deliver him when this occurs; second, he will not be turned over to the men whom he fears. Jeremiah is further instructed by Yahweh to tell Ebed-Melech that he will be saved in the midst of all the death and dying that he will
witness. I the LORD will ensure that he will not be pierced by a sword, but that his life will be preserved for him as a “prize.”

The profoundness of this blessing compels closer analysis. One is immediately taken aback by the fact that Yahweh speaks to a eunuch at all! Deut. 23:1 is direct in stating that a male whose testicles are crushed or whose penis has been detached from his body is forbidden to enter into the assembly of the LORD. This idea of being forbidden to stand in the presence of Yahweh implies a certain distancing from the presence and purview of Yahweh, even as it carries a connotation of shame within the community, particularly among a people with strict societal gender roles. Ronald Clements suggests that this chapter in Deuteronomy seeks to identify membership in the Israelite community by inclusion and exclusion. Clements views this exclusion as linked to the ancient belief that sexual potency was a sign of divine blessing and wholeness.\textsuperscript{214} It is no small matter to note that, even though Ebed-Melech is without ecclesiastical standing, Yahweh speaks to him.

To ensure that there is no confusion regarding the source of the oracle, Yahweh announces God’s self with two theohistorical identifiers: the LORD of Hosts and the God of Israel. It is well established that in ancient Near East culture, a name is not just a name or a label, but rather it implies character, identity, and existence. A name signifies the nature of the individual. Even as Jacob signifies trickster, so it is with the Creator, informing us of the godly nature. The LORD, or Yahweh, a name that occurs nearly seven

thousand times in the biblical texts, is the most common designation for God in the Old Testament. Its etymology can be traced to Exod. 3:14 as a divine response to Moses, who suggested that the Israelites might well want to know the name of the God who was authorizing his leadership and their projected liberation. The response is “eheyeh asher eheyeh,” “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be.” This is the name of the God of Israel. While certainly cryptic and perhaps with intention, the response is appropriate for a god suggesting the divine is enigmatic, mysterious, inexplicable, unknowable, and completely “Other.”

Implicit in this definition, however, are two additional inferences of significance. The first is the idea of a promise of divine presence: God will be present. To invoke the name “the God of Israel” brings to mind not only the call of Moses but also the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage. So then, “I am who I am” is not just present; this God is active in the history of God’s people.

The second inference is causative, that Yahweh causes things to be, brings into being, and creates. The name “LORD of hosts” in Hebrew is YHWH tseva’oth, a title that occurs more than two hundred fifty times in the biblical text, along with a number of variations. In the Septuagint, it is rendered Kyrios pantokrater. This title is not found in the Pentateuch nor in Joshua or Judges; it first appears in the Old Testament in connection with the sanctuary at Shiloh (1 Sam. 4:4). Further, the title is used in association with the ark, which represented the enthroned presence of God. The concept of Yahweh as

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“enthroned king” brings to mind the Canaanite envisioning of the god, El. It has been suggested that the original title of the deity was “el tseva’oth” (God of hosts), with hosts referring to the celestial beings and luminaries of the heavens that represent the armies that accompany the divine warrior (1 Sam. 17:45). These celestial beings would also include those beings that are in attendance at the divine council.216

Beyond the divine’s self-identification, the verses of this blessing contain four verbs that also demand our attention. The first three are actions that Yahweh promises to exercise in his protection of Ebed-Melech. The fourth is an emotive action employed by Ebed-Melech toward Yahweh, which inherently possesses its own rewards. It will be addressed in a separate topic area.

Yahweh says, “I will deliver thee in that day. … I will surely deliver thee, … because thou has put thy trust in me.” The first deliverance verbs are nathan and natsal. The first verb, nathan, is a common verb that appears more than two thousand times in the biblical texts, with a preponderance of it interpreted as “give,” but it is translated as “to hand over” or “deliver” in about one hundred eighty instances. Theologically speaking, nathan is found in those contexts where God is said to have delivered his people from their enemies. So, in this sense, nathan is synonymous with natsal.217

The verb natsal means deliverance from one’s human enemies. This same verb describes Reuben’s rescue of Joseph from his brothers in Gen. 37:21. In the book of Jeremiah, we see the verb used as a demand for justice (Jer. 21:12, 22:3), where the word

216 Ibid., 591–592.
217 Ibid., 260.
of the Lord comes to Jeremiah calling for the deliverance of the oppressed in Israel. Its most common usage is the emphasis on Yahweh delivering his people from their enemies (Deut. 23:14, Judg. 8:34, 1 Sam.12:10, 2 Kings 18:30). We see the same verb also used in God’s deliverance of Israel from the Egyptians (Exod. 2:19, 3:8; Judg. 6:9; Jer.15:21). Additionally, it is used where Yahweh promises to deliver Jerusalem from those nations that held her captive, taking her into exile. A significant inference is that natsal is also used to describe the deliverance of Israel from her false prophets and unjust rulers (Ezek. 13:23, 34:10).

The third verb for our consideration is malat. This verb appears about ninety times and carries the predominant sense of “escape.” In a third of its usage and in varying contexts, it is translated as “deliver.” There are a number of references where the verb refers to Yahweh delivering his people (Ps. 22:5, 107:20). While other texts refer to a divine promise to rescue or deliver Israel (Isa. 46:4, Dan. 12:1, Joel 2:32), there are also promises of the deliverance of Jerusalem and Jeremiah (Jer. 39:18). Additionally, the verb has a number of meanings related to the idea of flight or escape, and often the distinction between escape and flight is not precise. Next, let us consider the fourth verb, bṭḥ, to “trust.”

**Yahweh and Ebed-Melech on the Down Low**

Walter Brueggemann comments on Yahweh’s salvific act toward Ebed-Melech by contrasting his “trust” in Yahweh over and against Jeremiah’s admonitions to Judah not to “trust” in the claims regarding the Temple (Jer. 7:4). Brueggemann reasons that
Judah had misplaced its trust and, as a result, experienced destruction. Ebed-Melech, an exception, performed a concrete act of trust by intervening for Jeremiah.\textsuperscript{218} Trust, however, is the end product of an assurance and a proven ability to rely on the character, capacity, strength, and/or truth of someone—in this case, Yahweh. The establishment of “trust” implies both a process and inherently an element of time.

Ebed-Melech did not encounter Yahweh just during this episode of Jeremiah’s incarceration. The two beings have been in relationship for some time, obviously on the down low (DL). Here we use the term both to queer the relationship between the two and to highlight its hidden, obscure nature—who knew?

The Hebrew verb for trust is \textit{bṭḥ} or \textit{batach}.\textsuperscript{219} Its definition is most interesting, for while the derivatives of \textit{batach} reflect feelings of security, being unconcerned regarding reliability, the verb inherently carries a negative connotation. This connotation implies that which is relied upon may very well turn out to be deceptive. Many of the words derived from \textit{batach}, then, are used to convey a false security, yet, at the same time, the words are used to convey the idea of complete security in God alone.\textsuperscript{220}

In the Septuagint, \textit{batach} is interpreted in the negative sense by the word \textit{pepoithenai}, which shows up frequently in the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah, referring to false security. When one considers the passages in which \textit{batach} is used, the verb points

\textsuperscript{218} Brueggemann, \textit{Commentary on Jeremiah}, 373.

\textsuperscript{219} Ibid.

to many things on which man can rely, yet, in the end, they bring him to failure (Prov. 11:28; Ps. 49:7, 52:7; Job 39:11). The exception to the rule is trust in Yahweh. Yahweh can be utterly relied upon and will not fail. Here the LXX uses the word *elpizein*, which means “to hope.”

So Yahweh concludes his blessing to Ebed-Melech by acknowledging the servant’s unfailing trust, a trust that in and of itself produces certain blessings. Jer. 17:7-8 reads,

Blessed is the man that trusteth in the L ORD, and whose hope the L ORD is. For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green; and shall not be careful in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit.

In light of these expositions of titles and verbs, let us turn again to the blessing of Ebed-Melech (Jer. 39:15–18). While Jeremiah was shut up in the court of the prison, the word of the L ORD came to him saying, go and speak to Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian. Tell him that I, the L ORD, Yahweh, the I am who I am and the one who will be whom I will be; the I am God who is causative in my nature and brings things into being by my presence; I and all of the celestial hosts and luminaries of the heavens, along with the hosts of divine beings that attend the divine council; I, the L ORD of hosts, have some information that I want to pass along to you concerning Judah and Ebed-Melech personally. But before I inform you of that, so that there is no confusion, know that I am also the God of Israel, the one who rules all of nature and has the capacity to scatter my enemies by the outstretching of my hand. Now, as to what is about to occur: Jerusalem is about to be destroyed, including its temple and its walls. Both shall be burned to the ground, and neither shall remain standing. But in the midst of this destruction, pestilence, and strife, I am going to rescue you, Ebed-Melech, from those whom you fear and from
those who are your enemies. In every threatening situation that you encounter, I will provide you a means of escape. I will even deliver you from false prophets and false understandings. No weapon utilized against you will prove effective, and you will not fall by the sword. But your life will be preserved as a prize to you. I am doing this because you put your trust in me. And, as a result of our trusting relationship, from this day forward your life will be filled with good things. All that you need to flourish will be readily provided to you. Periods of scarcity will not hinder this promise to you, so when encountering scarcity, give it no thought. For you will forevermore experience a fruitful and productive life.

**Of Ebed-Melech**

The longest modern treatment on Ebed-Melech appears to be the essay of Tom Parker, “Ebed-Melech as Exemplar.” It is a seven-page exposition of the character that begins by raising the issue of skin color: “Can Ethiopians change their skin?”(Jer. 13:23). Parker asks whether there is some potential racism toward Ethiopians in the book of Jeremiah and uses the narrative of Ebed-Melech to address the issue. Parker further observes that Carroll’s commentary, *Jeremiah*, does not view Ebed-Melech as a historical character. Nevertheless, Parker concludes that most commentators view Ebed-Melech as a historical character.\(^{221}\) He then spends the next three pages in an in-depth discussion as

to whether or not *sarîs* should be interpreted as “eunuch” or “court official,” a popular argument that many commentators seem to engage relative to Ebed-Melech.

Ultimately, Parker briefly reiterates the rescue narrative, concluding that Jeremiah is exemplary in his character. Parker makes the point that there are only four instances of godly behavior in the book of Jeremiah. Parker identifies the prophet Jeremiah, Baruch, the Rechabites, and Ebed-Melech.

Emphasizing that Ebed-Melech’s actions should not be viewed lightly, the author makes the following observation: “the one man of whom we are told trusted God is not an Israelite, but an Ethiopian. … the only man who acted like the man that God and Jeremiah were looking for” was a man, a eunuch, whom some might view as “less than a man.”

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**Six Attributes of Black, Queer, Inspired Leadership**

While we have pointed to these six characteristics of Black, queer leadership previously, we now want to ensure that we have clarity regarding the terms.

**Self-knowledge**

From a philosophical perspective, self-knowledge may be understood as knowledge of one’s unique and particular mental state. This knowledge includes one’s beliefs, desires, and sensations. It is also referred to as knowledge regarding one’s persisting self—its ontological nature and character traits. Self-knowledge is distinctive in that we come to it through careful introspection guided by our unique positions to

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222 Ibid., 258–259.
regulate our own mental states. Additionally, our pronouncements regarding our own states bear a special authority or a presumption of truth.\textsuperscript{223} If pressed to an extremity, self-knowledge can be both infallible and omniscient. To be infallible regarding one’s mental state is to be without a false belief that one is in a given mental state. To be omniscient about one’s mental state is to have a sufficient surety to know the mental state that one is in. Needless to say, neither infallibility nor omniscience is accepted by most contemporary philosophers. In other words, there is little evidence that one knows all of what one possesses in a given mental state or that said knowledge is without fallibility.\textsuperscript{224}

I suggested in this chapter that Ebed-Melech has undergone certain introspective methods of personal inquiry, including negating the negation, that contributed to a strong sense of self-knowledge. It is in part this self-knowledge, along with a relationship with the divine, that contributes to a high degree of confidence. In this case, it contributes to a confidence sufficient to take on the challenge of advocating for, and physically engaging in, rescuing the life of the prophet Jeremiah.

\textbf{Discernment}

The act of discernment is related to issues of wisdom combined with some degree of objectivity. It is a primary characteristic in elements of religious and spiritual development and can be understood as the ability to judge wisely and critically. The early church


father St. Ignatius believed that the primary relationship between the believer and the divine is an internal relationship of the heart. For St. Ignatius, every human being is called to a specific and a general vocation. St. Ignatius believed that when the “call of God” was communicated to the heart, the emotions would be stirred, and that the identifying of those emotions by the intellect points to the will of God for the individual. Also contributing to the need for discernment is the recognition that all creation is permeated by both goodness and evil. Here evil may be understood as both the consequence of sin and a personal force. It is the desire of the believer to respond to the word and the purposes of the Christ—to do good and not evil. Therefore, it is the task of the believer to discern the movement of the Spirit in the time and circumstances of their lived experience—to see clearly, even in times of darkness. Discernment permeates the narrative of Ebed-Melech from the decision to discuss the matter with Zedekiah to the retrieving of the worn clothing to protect the prophet. Discernment is everywhere.

**Agency**

Agency may be simplistically defined as the faculty of acting or working as a means to an end. However, when viewed psychologically, human agency has four central properties: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. First, individuals create and engage in the development of plans and strategies that they believe can influence and shape their preferred future. Second, people regulate their

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thinking, thinking ahead of time, determining and anticipating likely outcomes of their actions. Third, with regard to self-reactiveness, the individual not only makes plans and related ideas but also constructs appropriate courses of action and monitors their execution. Finally, self-reflectiveness involves proactive self-awareness, through which humans can reflect on the soundness of their thinking, the strength of their capacities, and the meaning of their pursuits. Through this process of reflection, corrections and adjustments can be made into plans, actions, strategies, and goals.

In addition to these core properties, agency operates in three modes: individual, proxy, and collective. Individual agency is when a person brings personal influence to bear on lived circumstance. If the individual does not have the capacity to accomplish this end, he or she may well appeal to someone else who can. Children turn to parents, students turn to teachers, etc. Lastly, certain instances require people to work together toward a desired outcome or in a collective manner. The narrative of Ebed-Melech rescuing Jeremiah encompasses all three modes. Ebed-Melech individually went to Zedekiah on Jeremiah’s behalf. Recognizing that he alone did not have the capacity to free the prophet, he appeals to the king. Lastly, it was the collective behavior of Ebed-Melech and the soldiers that implemented the physical rescue.

Creativity

To be creative is to be inventive, imaginative, and original, and to exhibit vision as well as intellect. Creativity must be not only original but also fitting, having some sort of value and/or solving a problem. And creativity is not just problem-solving but also problem-finding. Problem-finding is related to the identification of a problem that previously was unseen. In fact, many creative people believe problem identification as more important to creative achievement than problem-solving. Creativity can also be understood as self-expression, as in artistic performances. Creativity as a personality trait is tied to motivation, yet does simply emerge. Creativity appears to be a trait that people work at, study, and intentionally nurture. It is linked to the intrinsic interest that appears to provide increased capacities for considering numerous options and finding original insight.

Carl Jung (1865–1961), the Swiss psychiatrist, theorized that another characteristic that may contribute to creativity is the capacity to tap into the unconscious. Jung’s view of creativity and the unconscious appears to be consistent with the idea of incubation and its role creatively. Many famous creators suggest that good ideas and insights depend on this kind of incubation and surface as “aha” moments. Ebed-Melech displays great creativity in his arguments to Zedekiah to remove Jeremiah from  

230 Ibid., 165.
231 Ibid.
the cistern, in the rescue strategy, and even more so in choosing to cushion Jeremiah from any potential harm from rope burn.

Liminality

In her dissertation, “The Hidden Eunuchs of the Hebrew Bible: Uncovering an Alternate Gender,” Janet Everhart discusses the definition and function of liminality. Everhart defines liminality as the eunuch’s ability to cross varied thresholds that are barriers to cis (hetero-normative) men and women. Everhart views this capacity as a source of their power. Though often on the margins of society, eunuchs can literally be found guarding various thresholds. Eunuchs move between the world of the king and his women, facilitating communication and often carrying messages from one powerful person to another. They acquire access to the most intimate functions in the lives of powerful men and women, such as bathing the women and guarding kings as they sleep.

While Ebed-Melech’s specific responsibilities are not outlined in the rescue narrative, his access and liminality are prominent: he can leave his assigned post at will, approach the king without summons or introduction, and appears to have “carte blanche” to the kingdom’s resources. In the same manner that colonialism is the predecessor of institutional racism, liminality is the predecessor of multi-culturalism. Colonialism and its structure of dominance support a hierarchy of privilege; advancing a social construct of inclusion and exclusion based on some criteria such as class or status. It is this

232 Everhart, “Hidden Eunuchs,” 64.

233 Ibid., 65.
hierarchical thinking which supports discrimination by race. Liminality suggests a capacity and appreciation for the positive engagement of varied peoples, ideologies, expressions, and communities, without discrimination.

**Power Tempered by Compassion**

This culminating leadership trait may well be more a state of acquired equipoise, resulting from the synergy of the preceding five characteristics, than an individual attribute. Without question, Ebed-Melech is a powerful individual, deriving power from each of the qualities we have described. Yet, permeating his persona is a strong sense of compassion that appears to influence how he uses his power. The *Oxford Dictionary* indicates that the original source of the word “compassion” is Old French (prior to 1400 CE) taken from ecclesiastical Latin (*compassion* (n), from *compati*), meaning to suffer with. The modern definition is to have sympathetic pity and concern for the suffering or misfortune of others.

One of the unanswered questions raised by Western commentators regarding this narrative is why Ebed-Melech chose to engage in the rescue of Jeremiah in the first place. Being a man of compassion, having sympathetic pity and concern for the suffering and misfortune of others, may have been sufficient.

**Analysis**

Scholars of the book of Jeremiah are frequently challenged by the disjointed manner in which the book is organized. Very few of the narratives are sequential, an intentional literary technique to convey to the readers the anxiety of the times. Our introduction reflects that disjointedness. Initially, it is because we open this chapter queried by the overt confidence and the evolved level of critical thought expressed by the
character Ebed-Melech. The unarticulated question is how to account for such evolved leadership being expressed by a Black, queer male servant, who appears to be free from the normal rules of subjugation. So we lift Memmi for his ability to articulate the governing rules of dominance, and we lift self-love as a technique for throwing off the negations implicit in dominance.

If Ebed-Melech did not achieve this confidence and self-knowledge through self-love, perhaps Jan Mohammed can help us with his strategy of negating the negation. These theoretical shards are attempts to acquire some insight into Ebed-Melech’s character and context. But perhaps we are slightly ahead of ourselves and need to back up a bit. For in reflection and given a careful reading of the biblical texts, I am convinced that if there is one person the biblical writers of the book of Jeremiah want us to come to know, other than the prophet, it is Ebed-Melech.

Consider the introductory statement in Jer. 38:7-8a, “Now when Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, one of the eunuchs which was in the king’s house, heard that they had put Jeremiah in the dungeon; the king then sitting in the gate of Benjamin; Ebed-Melech went forth out of the king’s house, and spake to the king.” This opening introduction tells us both who Ebed-Melech is and who he is not in no uncertain terms. It is toward Ebed-Melech that the biblical writers direct our attention, signaling an important development in the narrative and saying, “Now when Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian … heard.” In other words, as it relates to the plight of Jeremiah, nothing significant came into motion or process until the point when Ebed-Melech heard about Jeremiah’s circumstance. It is to Ebed-Melech that the biblical writers point our attention toward substantive change in the plot and to the substantive contributions that his character will provide to the narrative.
A close consideration of this initial sentence also illustrates some literary effort to distinguish Ebed-Melech in very substantive and critical ways from the other eunuchs. Yes, there is a correlating descriptive, but, at the same time, the passage provides a dissociative distinction. While Ebed-Melech is described as being one of the eunuchs in the king’s house, he is named and they are not. Ebed-Melech thinks, they apparently do not. Ebed-Melech speaks, they do not. Ebed-Melech acts, they do not. This opening sentence could be reinterpreted to say, Ebed-Melech is a member of the community of eunuchs, but he is distinctively different. He may be among them, but he is not one of them. There is Ebed-Melech, and then there are an undetermined number of nameless, voiceless, disengaged eunuchs living in the king’s house, none of them to this date having been identified. None of the nameless, silent, disengaged eunuchs living in the king’s house has been identified by nationality. No other eunuch penetrates the descriptive ceiling of being identified as anything more than one of a number of eunuchs living in the king’s house.

Additionally, in support of my argument that the biblical writers wanted us to know Ebed-Melech, I offer this analysis: as a means of knowing this character more thoroughly, the biblical writers place Ebed-Melech as the object of two critical gazes:

1) Ebed-Melech is under the gaze of the Jerusalem biblical writers (Jer. 38:7–13) and
2) he is also under the gaze of the Yahweh (Jer. 39:16–18).

The disjointed manner in which the book of Jeremiah is composed was mentioned earlier. The full narrative of Ebed-Melech and Jeremiah’s rescue is also disjointed, and, for our purposes, I interpret the primary pericope of the narrative as reflective of the biblical writer’s gaze, while the second pericope (Jer. 39:16-18) reflects the divine view
of this servant of the king. But to excavate the full character and his salvific acts, both
gazes must be considered. This allows a fuller exploration and development of character
than could be attained if we were limited to tying his traits and attributes to specific
chapter and verse. Who do the Jerusalem biblical writers says Ebed-Melech is, and who
does Yahweh say he is?

While the text points to him as a change agent, it does not identify the person who
provided Ebed-Melech with the information about Jeremiah’s imprisonment. It could
have been any number of sources, internal to the king’s house or external. Yet, what did
the person relaying the information hope to initiate? Was there some reason to believe
that Ebed-Melech, having been provided this information, might initiate some positive
change of status for the prophet?

I submit that Ebed-Melech is a queer patriarch, non-procreative, yet he has chosen
a benevolent expression of patriarchal masculinity, incorporating the same into his
leadership style. And yet he alone brings femininity into the equation. What is its
ministry of presence? It must be powerful, as it is virtually erased in the book of
Jeremiah. How can one address a whole nation with a document that has no female
character in the whole book? Such an effort of suppression would suggest that just by
showing up, she, the feminine it, alters perspectives, an energy possessing a definitive
quality.

Ebed-Melech knows what it means to be subjugated and to wear the mark of that
subjugation in his body daily. His lived experience and its resulting benevolence alone
are sufficient to evoke compassion on his part for the plight of the prophet. Additionally, the two men are both Black eunuchs. Ebed-Melech is an Ethiopian eunuch, made of men. Jeremiah, an Afro-Asiatic eunuch, created for the sake of the kingdom so that the word of God would be preached to Judah in her last days (Jeremiah 1).

But if we are to draw from the full story, we need to attend to the fact that Yahweh and Ebed-Melech are on the down low. Here the text is delinquent again; it does not tell us when the D/L started. But perhaps it was just one of those things. I like to say, “God has an addiction: it’s God’s people and all that God desires for them.” But given the absence of a specific verse on which to make our argument, perhaps it is time to consider the second gaze on Ebed-Melech: the blessing (Jer. 39:16-18).

I argue that to ensure a lack of confusion regarding the source of this blessing, the LORD God gave the same name that he gave to Moses when he was about to lead the children of Israel out of bondage. Part of the difficulty of this argument is that I am interpreting that text with a Black hermeneutic. Given a Black hermeneutic, the text is not limited to the name of Yahweh as a military leader. From a Black perspective, the text means that I am the LORD God and I am in charge. I am who I am, no one tells me how or when to be, and I will do what I will! This name may be further understood as one who

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234 One of the major questions of biblical commentators is why Ebed-Melech got involved in this messy situation. I submit that to bear the marks of physical domination in one’s body is a constant reliving of experience of physical domination. To see anyone in a similar situation evokes empathy/compassion in a rational individual.

235 Felder, African Heritage Study Bible, 1076.
made all things, and having done so, all things are subject to Yahweh. The Black
definition of the LORD God resembles a dominating patriarch on steroids.

From the divine gaze, Yahweh intimates that he and Ebed-Melech have been in
conversation prior to the implementation of the salvific act (Jer. 39:18). In fact, it implies
that Yahweh may well have asked Ebed-Melech to rescue the prophet, and Ebed-Melech,
pushing past some reservations of fear, complied.
Chapter 4:

Of Appreciable Social Change, Context, and Biblical Text

*If I don’t rise in the mornin’... it will be alright.*
—Traditional

Chapter Overview

This chapter explores the primary lenses that influence my interpretation, with some observations regarding the related theorists. With this established, we move to interpret the context of Jerusalem in which Ebed-Melech exercised his leadership. Additionally, we identify similar social indicators observable in periods of appreciable social change, periods such as the Civil Rights Movement and the fall of Judah as depicted in the book of Jeremiah.

*Literary, Sociological, and Theological Approaches to the Book of Jeremiah*

The book of Jeremiah is written in a very disjointed manner. This disjointedness is the intent of its authors to reflect the chaotic nature of their times. To this end, commentators have chosen various themes and varying memes in an attempt to bring coherence and contextual clarity to the book.
Stulman describes the book of Jeremiah as a “witness to the haunting reality of a crumbling world.”\textsuperscript{236} Pointing out its lack of chronological order, multiple literary genres, and minimal literary coherence, Stulman quotes John Bright, who refers to the book as “a hopeless hodgepodge thrown together without any discernible principle of arrangement at all.”\textsuperscript{237} And then there is the famous Robert Carroll quote, “The reader who is not confused by reading the book of Jeremiah has not understood it!”\textsuperscript{238}

More recently, Daniel Epp-Tiessen has taken up a long-standing theme, “True and False,” that centers on the compositional history, structure, and theology of the book of Jeremiah by focusing on chapters 23–29.\textsuperscript{239} More will be said about this theme in the discussion of the conversation between Jeremiah and Hananiah taken from portions of this same text.

Brueggemann seeks to strike a sense of prophetic and theological balance in his commentary, examining the central themes of Jeremiah’s call from God to project the historical experience of Judah leaving and ultimately returning to the land.\textsuperscript{240} Jeremiah is called to root out, pull down, and destroy, even as he is called to build and plant (Jer. 1:10). Brueggemann outlines a somatic summary that reflects the judgment of God as

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{237} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{238} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{240} Brueggemann, \textit{Commentary on Jeremiah}, 23.
\end{flushright}
demonstrated in bringing Jerusalem to an end. Additionally, he demonstrates the deliverance of God, which is the subsequent offer of historical possibility that Yahweh provides to the exilic community.

Brueggemann is particularly helpful in our approach to the book of Jeremiah, as he gives us permission to move past historical criticism as a primary means of interpretation to consider other more venturesome interpretations. Providing several alternatives, he discusses both an ideological approach and a canonical approach. Brueggemann displays some discomfort with the ideological approach, primarily because it derives from Karl Marx, who employed the term in reference to “distortions of reality, whereby vested interests deliberately skew and misrepresent reality.” Brueggemann finds more comfort in Clifford Geertz’s definition of ideology as a means of “sustained sense-making by a given community.” Regarding the canonical perspective, Brueggemann argues that Childs and Robert Clements insist that the book of Jeremiah is designed to make a large and serious theological affirmation—an affirmation that is God-centered. Yet, for Brueggemann, there is a certain irony that the ideological and canonical interpretations are allied—the primary difference between the two approaches is rooted more in the reaction and response of the interpreter, which he sees as being informed more by personal and religious history and passion than by any scholarly acumen.241

From an interpretive perspective, Brueggemann employs two methodologies that are central to this project: sociological analysis and literary analysis. For our purposes, we will consider his sociological approach, reserving literary analysis for the work of

241 Ibid., x-xii.
Toni Morrison. Sociological analysis may be understood as an approach that takes into consideration the interest, ideologies, and construction of reality that are operative in the creation and articulation of a given text.²⁴² This approach differs from historical criticism in that it does not seek to place the texts in a specific historical location but rather places the text among the social voices and dynamic forces that are part of its construction. Here one pays close attention both to the voice in the text and to other voices in the circumstance, where the lone voice may be in tension, disagreement, or agreement.

This analysis becomes a particularly rich exercise in the book of Jeremiah because each text contains so many voices. For example, the act of liberating Jeremiah contains the voices of Jeremiah, Zedekiah, the soldiers who are the accusers of Jeremiah, the soldiers who are assigned to rescue him, the princes of Judah who desire his death, those who initially reported Jeremiah’s incarceration to Ebed-Melech, as well as those who believe Jeremiah to be the prophet of Yahweh and those who do not. In addition to these voices are the important voices of Ebed-Melech, the narrator, and most significantly, the voice of Yahweh. Each voice, in turn, is undergirded by an ideological/theological stance, be it the old covenant tradition, the legitimacy of the monarchy, royal-temple theology, pro-Babylonian ideologies, or pro-Egyptian political preferences.

Additionally, for members of the royal family, their lives, their way of life, and their privilege are all under the threat of loss. Here there is a vocal cacophony. And yet, the challenge exists to listen to each voice as to allow some version of the true social dynamic at work to emerge. Such is the nature of sociological analysis from the

²⁴² Ibid., 13.
Brueggemann perspective. This is the challenge of leadership for Ebed-Melech, and it remains one of our greatest challenges today.

Robert Wilson challenges us to consider the difficulty in reading ancient texts and suggests that in every act of reading there is a communication gap between the reader and the text. This gap, he says, is present among contemporary authors and their readers. The gap widens, however, becoming even more distant over long periods of time, as the cultural and spatial differences between the author and reader are more pronounced.²⁴³

For Wilson, on one side of the communication gap is the text, the product of the author who shaped it to reflect a given reality that is intended to have an impact on the reader. The purpose of this text may be to convey information or to evoke an emotional response. Whatever the intent, the vehicle of this communication is the text, which is created by the use of language, symbols commonly understood in the author’s time, and certain literary forms. Therefore, it is clear that society influences this process at two distinct levels. First, the author’s worldview is a synthesis of views from the surrounding society and the author’s personal insights. Second, the text or literary expression of this worldview is the result of the author’s creative use of the society’s language and literary conventions.²⁴⁴

The reader is on the other side of the communication gap. In similar fashion, the reader brings to the text a personal worldview, specific linguistics, and literary conven-


²⁴⁴ Ibid.
tions, all of which are the product of certain social conditionings. Even if the reader and the
author are contemporaries, their patterns of linguistics and perceptions of reality will not necessarily be congruent. The reader must overcome any incongruence in order to understand the author’s text.$^{245}$

From Wilson’s perspective, two primary goals must be accomplished in the task of successful reading. First, the reader must be conscious of any personal understandings or predispositions so as not to impose them on the text. Second, the reader must be informed of the author’s “understandings and use of literary conventions.” At a fundamental level, the reader must know the basic language of the text, along with any significant idioms or special dialects. On a higher level of understanding, the reader must seek to understand the literary devices and the worldview being expressed. Wilson argues that, because there is subjectivity on both sides of the communication, “a definitive understanding of the text can never be achieved.” For Wilson, two different readers will see different things in the same text; however, each of these divergent readings can be considered valid so long as it is “an informed reading knowledgeable of the conventions being utilized by both reader and author.” Wilson suggests that the hallmark of a valid reading is that it can be recognized and validated by other informed readers of the same text, providing us with “two safeguards—the text itself and the community of informed readers,” thus preventing “individual interpretations from becoming overly subjective.” Given these considerations, it is easy to understand Wilson’s argument that ancient texts are more difficult to interpret, as there is a direct relationship between the age of the text

$^{245}$ Ibid.
and the essential understandings that the reader must know in order to be an informed reader.246

**Black Hermeneutic and the Book of Jeremiah**

Central to the discourse of Black biblical studies is the Black hermeneutic. This hermeneutic encompasses the theories and methods of biblical interpretation employed initially by enslaved Africans and expanded upon by the succeeding generations of Black preachers and scholars. Its communal purpose is to extract meaning that speaks to the social location, lived reality, and resulting consciousness of African-American Christian believers. At a more profound level, it seeks also to decenter Western hegemonic biblical interpretation that has historically supported racism, slavery, segregation, colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy. As such, the Black hermeneutic views the central reality of the text as liberation in contrast to domination.247

The Black hermeneutic may have emerged initially from the intuitiveness of Black preachers, both male and female, who “sat where they [enslaved Africans] sat.”248 It is clear that these biblical pioneers did not exegete the text with the intellectual formality of our day; however, they did seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to impart to them a “word from the Lord.”249 To this end, the Black hermeneutic can be traced historically to the earliest recorded African-American sermons.

246 Ibid., 4–5

247 Floyd-Thomas et al., *Black Church Studies*, 55.


249 Floyd-Thomas et al., *Black Church Studies*, 62.
Frank Thomas records the genius of the African-American preaching tradition by referencing a sermon titled “Uncle Wash’s Funeral.” Recorded in a slave narrative authored in 1936, Ned Walker heard the sermon around 1866–67. Uncle Wash was the blacksmith in his community, his business located in the fork of the road across from a major church. He had been a very strong man and had used his trade on behalf of all the people of his community. Wash had joined the Spring Valley African Methodist Episcopal Church but had fallen from grace. He had been accused of stealing master Walter Bryce’s pig, and there was evidence suggesting his guilt. Wash was sent to prison, and while there he contracted consumption and died.

Uncle Pompey preached the funeral. Pompey was noted for his ability to preach a funeral. The central question in the minds of Black people was, “If you go to jail, can you also go to heaven?” Pompey took his text from the story of Paul and Silas locked in jail. He began by talking about Uncle Wash, his life of hard work and bravery, and how Uncle Wash tackled kicking horses and mules so that the crops could be cultivated and harvested and the community fed. Pompey suggested that it wasn’t eternally against the church member to have gone to prison, for the text states that Paul and Silas were locked in jail, and he was certain that they made it into heaven. Pompey then began to talk about a vision of Jacob’s ladder, envisioning Uncle Wash as he climbed Jacob’s ladder into heaven. He concluded his sermon by having the congregation sing “There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood.” As they began to sing the second verse about the dying thief, Pompey

250 Frank A. Thomas, They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1997), 1.
cried above the crowd, “I see brother Wash as he enters in and that dying thief is there to welcome him, thank God!” With that declaration, those assembled broke into great celebration and shouting. Clearly, the Black hermeneutic was well utilized in this sermon.

The Black hermeneutic can also be traced to the sociological analysis of W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois, who describes the consciousness of the American Negro, writes, “the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world that yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.” Du Bois concludes that this unique sociopolitical positioning of the Black community produces a double consciousness. People of African descent living in the United States must come to psychologically function within both the dominant culture and their own unique subculture. The Black hermeneutic emerges from this survival technique.

Mitchell introduces the Black hermeneutic to academia by reminding us of the distinctive nature of the Black religious experience in America. He insists that this experience was given a religious interpretation by those who were innocent of the White exegetical biblical tradition. Their interpretations emerged from their African consciousness and correspondence with the Bible. They preached as best they could, seeking a greater understanding of the biblical texts as they also sought to make sense of the lived

251 Ibid., 1-2.
252 Du Bois, Souls of Black Folk, 45.
Mitchell argues that the best of Black preaching is basically unchanged from the methodologies employed by the earliest Black preachers, because “Black preaching … was not in the mainstream of the changing world of White theology.” Additionally, he argues that Black preaching has survived basically unchanged in its isolation because it uniquely speaks to the needs of Black people. For these reasons and others, Mitchell does not see the Black hermeneutic competing or contradicting the hermeneutic of Gerhard Ebeling. Mitchell sees the Black hermeneutic supporting at least two main principles of Ebeling’s hermeneutic: 1) the gospel is declared in the vernacular of the people and 2) the gospel speaks directly to the contemporary man and his needs.

Another component of the Black hermeneutic and Black biblical studies is the exploration and identification of the Black presence in the biblical text. For people of African descent, this approach provides a multilevel connectedness with biblical stories, an intense sociopolitical connection and a direct racial connection. Subsequent scholarship has progressed to demonstrate that the context and cultures of the biblical world were located on the continent of Africa and were significantly influenced by an African consciousness. Therefore, the primary assertion of Black biblical hermeneutics in the current century is not only that there are Black people in the Bible but also that the corpus itself is set in an African context, both geographically and culturally.


255 Ibid., 27.

256 Ibid., 29.

257 Floyd-Thomas et al., *Black Church Studies*, 59–60.
In his introduction to *The Original African Heritage Study Bible*, Cain Hope Felder seeks to correct what he calls “the misconception.” This misconception is the view that almost all biblical character are Caucasian. Felder argues that the Bible is multiracial and multicultural, with a divine purpose as a universal story of salvation. Further, the land Europeans call “Africa” is the place from which the dust of the earth was gathered to create Adam. Pointing out that the geographical change in reference to Africa and the invention of “the Middle East,” Felder argues that, in biblical times, much of this geographical territory was considered to be “Africa.”

**Postcolonial Hermeneutic**

R. S. Sugirtharajah was the first scholar to introduce postcolonial criticism to biblical studies. His primary concern is to identify, challenge, and expose the dominant, national, and nativist biblical interpretations that have settled into “truth.” He addresses the complexities and ambivalence of the term “postcolonialism” by first tackling the broad criticism of the prefix “post.” In an effort to resolve the issue, Sugirtharajah refers to Rey Chow’s three specifications, or meanings, of the “post” prefix: 1) “having gone through,” 2) “after,” and 3) “a notion of time which is not linear but constant, marked by

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events that may be technically finished, but that can only be fully understood with the consideration of the devastation they left behind.”

The author employs the term as a resistant discourse that attempts to rewrite and counter colonial assumptions, representations, and ideologies. He freely admits that postcolonial hermeneutics will show up differently in every discipline, arguing that lens can be identified as it seeks to achieve four primary practices: 1) “dislodge Western constructions of knowledge about the Other;” 2) “reclaim the histories of the subaltern and chronicle overt and covert forms of resistance;” 3) “resist and transcend binary models by which the West has categorized its Other;” and 4) “expose the link between power and knowledge in the production of the colonial Other.”

These practices have a direct correlation to this project. The discussion regarding the labeling of Black male bodies and Black female bodies is a direct attempt to dislodge the constructs and purported knowledge as it relates to the West’s invention of the Negro. In Chapters One and Two we reclaim the history of Black leadership as these individuals engaged in the larger project of resistance: the Civil Rights Movement. The creation of a third model of leadership—Black, queer, inspired leadership—is an attempt to transcend the binary forms of leadership derived from White, cis, dominating or benevolent


261 Ibid., 16.

262 Sugirtharajah, ed., Voices from the Margin, 64–65.
patriarchy. This dissertation and its resulting projects fully reflect the practices of post-colonial theory, at least as it is defined by Sugirtharajah.

A major distinction in Sugirtharajah’s approach is the view that the Bible itself is problematic. The author seek to interrogate the Bible critically and provide us with a means of interpretation that emancipates rather than reinforces colonial or dominating hegemonic interest. Sugirtharajah suggests that our interpretive quest is not for the “truth” of the texts but rather for the “codes of colonial interest.” Once these codes are exposed, the interpreter can then take up a second task of “rehabilitating the biblical narrative” and relate the findings to other postcolonial concerns such as ethnicity.

Postcolonialism is also has a focus on identity. The author writes,

One of the legacies of colonialism is an intermingling of people and cultures, and the result is a hybridized identity—the formation of hyphenated, fractured, multiple, and multiplying identities. … [This hybridity] is a wider and more complex web of cultural negotiation and interaction, … [which] is not about the melting away of the difference between “us” and “them,” … but involves a newfound independence, achieved not simply by rejecting provincial, national, and imperial attachments, but by working through them …. The distinguishing feature of the new identity will be that it will go beyond the categories and representations worked out by [the West], who tend to work with core elements such as nationalism, spirituality, ethnicity, caste, femininity, and so forth, and will imaginatively forge a complex set of new identities that juggle different values and concepts.

South African author Musa W. Dube affirms Sugirtharajah’s argument and adds a feminist hermeneutic. Dube describes the biblical text as a Western book by which the world has been divided into “biblical Christian believers” (White Western believers) and

263 Sugirtharajah, Asian Biblical Hermeneutics, 18.
264 Ibid.
“pagans” (non-Christian Africans). She highlights the inherent contradiction in the image of Jesus as a “blue-eyed, blonde, white male” with a benevolent face and “the image of Mary the mother of Jesus … [as] a white woman.” Both of these figures lie in contrast to the devil depicted as “a black, horned man.” The author’s point is that the visual imagery portrayed in these characters reinforces the imperial dynamic of White Western dominance over and against the Black other. Dube identifies her hermeneutic as postcolonial and feminist. Dube affirms the biblical story as unfinished, noting that, for the “believer,” the story continues. She observes that the New Testament does not end with the Ascension, nor with the book of Revelation, for that matter; the narrative continues in the personage of the Holy Spirit empowering the “believer.” Her point is that any attempt at biblical interpretation that insists on holding the biblical text to a single, ancient, historical time does an injustice to the text.

Dube affirms that, in her experience, the Bible has functioned as an imperialist text. She argues that the nature of imperialism is a function of the biblical interpretation being “firmly contextualized in ancient times.” Noting that, while this methodology is not without its benefits, she keenly observes that privileging the ancient historical setting in the academic interpretation of the biblical texts diverts her experience and questions

266 Ibid., 14.
267 Ibid., 12.
from the field of study. Dube argues that “privileging the ancient history in biblical interpretation shields and isolates the text.” For Dube, as an African woman, to read the Bible from this perspective is to immediately engage in historical events of imperialism. For her, reading with this limitation is to journey into a “sinister” experience that transports her back into a dangerous period in her lived experience: a period with memories of “slavery, colonialism, apartheid, and neocolonialism.” Furthermore, reading the Bible for her is a reminder of the painful equating of Christianity with civilization and paganism with savagery.

Moving beyond the obstructive, Dube offers a definition of a postcolonial reading of texts. She suggests that a postcolonial reading analyzes the literary construction of the colonizing texts and shows “how they function to justify imperialism.” The analysis can focus on the construction of characters, gender constructions, geography, and travelers or how these works coalesce in justifying the domination of one by another.

In colonizing texts, texts that Dube suggests are designed to take possession of the minds and lands of “the Other,” one tends to find a sharp contrast in the characterization of the colonized and the colonizer. Those who are in subjugation tend to be depicted as “helpless, evil, inarticulate, backward, disorganized, lazy, exotic.” Adults may be portrayed as toddlers in need of instruction. Dube observes that these characters are then

268 Ibid., 13.
269 Ibid.
270 Ibid., 15–16.
271 Ibid.
placed next to those who are in control, who are portrayed as civilized and cultured. From Dube’s perspective, it is this contrast that the colonizer uses to validate its dominance over the colonized.²⁷²

As it relates to geography, imperial narratives tend to communicate a similar ideology, where some lands are depicted as empty, unoccupied, or waiting to be discovered. Some other lands are dark, diseased, and evil, while still other lands are a vision of light and reflected holiness.²⁷³

Dube’s greater contribution may be her investigation into mainstream White male and female biblical interpreters, who employ various methodologies from historical-critical to literary-critical to social-scientific, inviting readers into the world of the biblical writers and their constructs regarding the language of salvation, universal mission, and biblical history. Her concern is that these interpreters do not decolonize themselves or acknowledge the presence of empire or the imperial context in the biblical book.²⁷⁴ Here her work could be juxtaposed over and against that of Toni Morrison: Morrison outlining the limitation of the White literary imagination as it relates to Black characters, Dube as it relates to the limitations of the White colonized imagination.

According to Sugirtharajah, two primary interpretive tasks are attached to postcolonial biblical criticism. The first “is to interrogate the biblical narratives and the interpretations which legitimize and reinscribe colonial interests.” The second “is to

²⁷² Ibid., 16-17.
²⁷³ Ibid., 17.
²⁷⁴ Ibid., 16.
engage in an emancipatory reading of the text, informed by a hermeneutic yoked to postcolonial concerns.”

It is at this intersection that the postcolonial hermeneutic and the Black hermeneutic potentially complement each other: the postcolonial hermeneutic, with its capacity to articulate power and power relationships, linked with the Black hermeneutic, with its full carriage of cultural richness, artistic genius, perseverance, and transcendence. To ignore the interpretive significance of the rescue of Jeremiah by Ebed-Melech is to legitimize and reinscribe colonizing interest, because the text clearly displays a dominating power relationship of the princes of Judah over Jeremiah. To ignore his rescue is miss the liberative aspect of the text. To bring an emancipatory reading to the text is to initiate a healing of the abuses of dominance and privilege.

In summary, these two hermeneutics are related, but with certain distinctions. The Black hermeneutic is centered in the cultural, social, and political lived experience of enslaved and emancipated Africans living in the United States. Its goal is to extract biblical meaning that speaks to the communal consciousness of African Americans in their particular social location and unique lived reality. Therefore, it demands that this meaning be articulated in the vernacular of this people and address their contemporary conflicts, issues, and ideological challenges. More emphasis is placed on what meaning is needed than on how such meaning is derived, yet the exegete is challenged to remain within the boundaries of Black biblical orthodoxy. The exegete who would lead the community into a new biblical understanding will face considerable scrutiny before that conceptual interpretation gains broad acceptance. However, a larger issue is the lack of

egalitarian engagement of White cis biblical commentators, who dominate the field of interpretation. At what point does their credibility come into play for not engaging or accentuating voices from margins?

**Social Indicators**

Social indicators may be understood as narrowly as “quantitative measures of social conditions,” or as broadly as components of a social system model, or as direct measures of “welfare or the quality of life.” Smith refers to these indicators as “data bricks” that provide insight into more complex and interrelated societal trends and purposes. For our purposes, social indicators may be thought of as signs of the times. Social indicators assist us in multiple ways; they allow us to monitor, to report, and to forecast. Social indicators help us understand where a society is and can provide some indication as where it might be going. In our exploration of Ebed-Melech’s context of disruption, there are social indicators that parallel or are similar to ones found in the disruptive period of the Civil Rights Movement.

**Establishing Ebed-Melech’s Context**

The Babylonian Chronicles record that, in 597 BCE, on the second day of the last month of the year, Adar, Nebuchadnezzar “encamped against the city of Judah and …

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277 Ibid., 740.
seized the city and seized the king.” It was at this time that Jehoiakim, king of Judah, surrendered, in order to prevent the complete annihilation of Jerusalem. The king, members of the royal family, and the upper class of Judah, along with warriors, artists, and priests, were led into exile. It is during this initial siege that most of the golden vessels of the Jerusalem temple were confiscated. Zedekiah, Jehoiakim’s uncle, a legitimate descendant of the house of David, was appointed puppet king by Nebuchadnezzar.

Ten years have passed since this initial siege, and Nebuchadnezzar is still the king of Babylon. Zedekiah is still on the throne in Judah, but the question is, “for how long?” For the second time, Judah is being besieged by the Babylonians. The Jerusalem wall, a structure designed as a protective exterior barrier, is now, in essence, an interior prison wall. All egress and ingress are obstructed. Fear, uncertainty, anger, and confusion are the dominant emotions as Judah faces potential devastation.

A flicker of hope, however, remains alive in the consciousness of Judah because of its alliance with Egypt. It is possible that, even at this late date, the Egyptians will return and ward off the Babylonians. Among temple worshippers, there is also a flicker of hope that Yahweh, Judah’s god of history, will intervene and rescue them in the eleventh hour. To succumb to defeat because Egypt does not intervene would present one set of historical/political circumstances, outcomes, and implications. The failure of Yahweh to appear, however, would turn Judah’s theological perspective and theocracy completely upside-down. This challenge will be explored more fully in an upcoming section on

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pertinent conversations. There are overt signs of theological disruption as Jeremiah, the primary prophet of Yahweh, is imprisoned in a muddy cistern, without food or water, for his preaching and its impact on the people.

The ministry of Jeremiah is traced from the reign of Josiah in 627 BCE to the exile of Judah’s leadership in 597 BCE and through the destruction of Judah in 587 BCE. At this juncture, Jeremiah has been preaching for forty years. Called to be a prophet in the thirteenth year of Josiah’s reign, Jeremiah learns of Yahweh’s knowledge of him, which from the divine perspective began before his being formed in his mother’s womb. Further, before Jeremiah emerged from his mother’s womb, Yahweh had already consecrated and appointed him a prophet to the nations. In his youth, Jeremiah objected to his calling and expressed his unreadiness to be a prophet. Yahweh extends his own hand and touches Jeremiah’s mouth, filling it with the words of the Lord and appointing him over the nations to pluck up, pull down, destroy, overthrow, build, and plant (Jer. 1:9–10).

While very little is said about the person of Jeremiah in the book’s initial introduction, the focus is on his family and his calling as a receptor of the word of God. The prophet comes from a priestly family that resided in the city of Anathoth, located about three miles from Jerusalem. This small piece of information implies that Jeremiah was well-educated and deeply steeped in the extensive history of Israel and its God. The idea of Jeremiah’s sound education is reinforced by his sophisticated use of the Hebrew language, his knowledge of theological traditions, and his own relationship with Yahweh. Fretheim points out that even this brief mention of Jeremiah’s heritage implies that the
word of God does not emerge without preparation. When the word does emerge, it comes through a prepared individual for a specific people at a specific time.  

If we take the biblical texts seriously, it is not difficult to conclude that Jeremiah was an exceptional prophet and preacher. In addition to a high degree of oratorical skill, we must mention his propensity toward sign acts. Not only did Jeremiah preach and speak effectively but also he understood the power of symbolism and employed it as a part of his ministry. Early in his ministry, Jeremiah is instructed by Yahweh to purchase a linen loincloth and wear it publicly, which he did. Later, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, instructing him to take the loincloth to the Euphrates River and hide it in the crevice of the rock. After a period of time, the prophet is instructed to go and examine the linen loincloth, which of course is soiled and ruined. Yahweh and Jeremiah use this sign act to correlate that closeness of the girdle to the body reflects the relationship between the sovereign and Judah. However, that close relationship has been disrupted by the corrosive nature of the sin of rebellion.  

To summarize the character of Jeremiah is to assert that he is a divinely anointed, consecrated prophet of God—a prophet who emerges from a lineage of individuals who have served the priestly function. He is a preacher of profound capacity, who utilizes sign acts and symbolic demonstrations to enhance his message. Furthermore, he is a prophet/preacher who is under the threat of assassination for his denunciation of the primary, historically embedded, dominating narrative of a specific society. Jeremiah exhibits several of the leadership qualities this dissertation promotes. He is a queer, benevolent

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patriarch with considerable agency and creativity. While his degree of liminality is restricted in geographical scope, nevertheless, he clearly understands the value of place as it relates to message. Here we might consider his sermon on the linen girdle (Jer. 13:1-11). If we apply a Black hermeneutic here, it is not beyond the scope of parallel horizons to note that there is a resemblance between the prophet Jeremiah and the nation of Judah in Jerusalem in 587 BCE and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the United States of America in Washington, D.C., in 1963 C.E., if no more than that they are both prophets under the threat of assassination.

These attributes may also be understood as social indicators, which we find present in seasons of appreciable social change and, furthermore, a theme I ascribe to the book of Jeremiah. To this list of anointed prophetic leadership—prophetic leadership under the threat of assassination, sign acts, and demonstrations—must be added another significant social indicator, the power and use of lament. In addition to these social indicators, we must also acknowledge two primary ideological debates, accommodation versus resistance and nationalism versus assimilation.

**Power and Use of Lament**

In his monograph, Mark S. Smith draws a sharp distinction between the book of Jeremiah and the books of Ezekiel and Isaiah, noting that, unlike the other prophetic works, the book of Jeremiah focuses dramatically on the figure of the prophet himself. In the book of Jeremiah, the reader is given an intimate portrait of the prophet. Central to

this intimate portrait are the laments or, as they are sometimes called, the complaints.\textsuperscript{281} Smith identifies five major elements common to the laments: 1) an invocation of God, 2) a direct speech from the enemies of Jeremiah, 3) Jeremiah declaring his innocence, 4) the prophet’s request for vengeance against his enemies, and 5) the divine response.\textsuperscript{282}

In contrast, Brueggemann labels these laments as frank and personal prayers that not only speak to the destruction of Judah but also carry a rough and tumble conversation with Yahweh. Brueggemann agrees with Smith that the laments in the book of Jeremiah liturgically relate to laments found in the book of the Psalms. Brueggemann argues that these laments were originally individual and personal; however, over time, the sentiment of these prayers were affirmed by the larger religious community, and through this process became more significant.\textsuperscript{283} If we apply the Black hermeneutic here, we see a similar process with the development and retention of African-American spirituals.

Jeremiah 8:21-22 is an example; here the prophet is weeping for the condition of his people, and he asks, Is there no balm in Gilead? African American bards heard these words, reflected on them in light of their suffering and their “suffering Savior,” and concluded that “there is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole!” in this process creating one of the most beautiful and inspiring spirituals known to man.

\textsuperscript{281} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{282} Ibid., 2.

\textsuperscript{283} Brueggemann, \textit{Commentary on Jeremiah}, 114–115.
In their anthology of African American literature, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay open by clarifying the tradition of African-American spirituals and stressing how imperative it is to understand that this form of musical expression exists alongside several oral forms of expression that comprise the African-American vernacular tradition. In addition to spirituals, this literary category includes church songs, sermons, stories, blues ballads, and even the rap songs of today, which are forms of the oral expression of African-American people and includes that which is not literate or written.

Beyond the centrality of the oral and its unique sound, characteristics of the expressions include in-group, secretive, and coded messages and a projection toward the defensive while maintaining a sense of the aggressive. Inherent in this understanding is a suggestion that these expressions are not necessarily for others beyond the group that created them. As such, they are not creatively influenced by outside forces; rather, they emerge from the perspective of the indigenous group’s Afro-consciousness. These expressions reflect the values, style, and character of African-American life in a highly charged language with a propensity toward the eloquent. Additionally, these traits reflect Africanisms such as call and response, communality, and centrality of the drum or rhythmic pattern found not only in musical forms but also in rhyme and the telling of tales. Most importantly, there is an openness to improvisation.

284 Gates and McKay, Norton Anthology, 3.
285 Ibid., 4.
Richard Allen, the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, produced the first collection of African-American spirituals in 1801. W. E. B. Du Bois was the first American scholar, however, to interpret African-American spirituals more than a century later.\textsuperscript{286} In the final chapter of \textit{The Souls of Black Folks}, Du Bois described the spirituals as “the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas” and as “the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.”\textsuperscript{287} Simultaneously, Du Bois labeled the spirituals as “sorrow songs,” the voice of exiles. He stressed, however, that, in the midst of all the sorrow projected through these songs, there is a breath of hope, a faith that is the final accounting of the world’s events and that justice will prevail.\textsuperscript{288}

Twenty-two years after the initial Du Bois interpretation, brothers James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson produced two major books on the subject of spirituals. James Weldon Johnson, the prolific poet of the two, opens the introduction to volume one with the poem, “O Black and Unknown Bards.” He elevates the Black genius of those nameless, unknown, and gifted of song, whose lips he says have touched “the sacred fire.” Johnson asks about those who created these songs of sorrow that are noble of theme and great in spiritual vision. He asks, “Who heard great ‘Jordan roll’? Whose starward

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{286} James Cone, \textit{The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation} (New York: Seabury Press, 1972). \\
\textsuperscript{287} Du Bois, \textit{Souls of Black Folks}, 251. \\
\textsuperscript{288} Ibid., 261–62.
\end{flushright}
Johnson does not seek a full analysis of the musical composition of the spiritual but rather identifies its primary components. He argues that the spiritual, drawn from ancient African musicality, rich in rhythm with lesser emphasis on melody and harmony, ultimately emerges with a new distinction. For Johnson, in contrast to its African origins, the spiritual takes on a new energy, undergirded by its rhythms but elevating in its melodic and harmonic components. Further, from his perspective, this transformation is because, “at the precise and psychic moment, there was blown through or fused into the vestiges of his African music the spirit of Christianity, as he [the enslaved African] knew Christianity.”

Juxtaposing African music and the spirit of Christianity, Johnson explains the elements of Christianity that were of great appeal to enslaved Africans. First, summarizing their context of exile, cultural estrangement, and the persistent presence of physical and psychic trauma, Johnson reasons that enslaved Africans seized Christianity, the religion of compensations in the life to come for the ills suffered in the present existence, the religion which implied the hope that in the next world there would be a reversal of conditions, of rich man and poor man, of proud and meek, of master and slave.

Johnson further argues that, without Christianity and its influence, there would be no spirituals as we know them. The theohistorical context of the Jews, as related in the Old Testament, provided the canvas upon which the vivid imagery of the spirituals has


290 Ibid., 20.

291 Ibid.
been so richly painted. Through this reasoning, the God who delivered the children of Israel could or would certainly deliver the enslaved Africans. As God had shut the jaws of the lion and delivered Daniel, why would he not deliver every man? Ezekiel’s vision of a wheel-within-a-wheel sparks the necessary *mysterium tremendum* essential to tenacious devotion and unrelenting faith. From Johnson’s perspective, given these underpinnings, the spirituals at one level emerge as songs affirming the primary tenets of the Christian faith—“patience, forbearance, love, faith, and hope.”

Johnson argues that this position is neither scientific nor historical. He attributes such a position to prejudicial mind, an unwillingness to concede the creation of so much beauty to a people they wish to view as absolutely inferior. Facing the proposition that spirituals are imitations of music the Negro heard elsewhere, Johnson asks, what music might this have been that some five to six hundred songs might have sprung from? Johnson notes that no one has ever expressed a doubt regarding the titles or poetry of these songs. And significantly, if they did originate elsewhere, why has no one ever

\[\text{292 Ibid.}\]

\[\text{293 Ibid., 14.}\]
sought to stake claim to them? Affirming that the poetry and text of the songs are Negro in character, Johnson asks, “Why then doubt the music?”

In full rebuttal, Johnson turns to history, noting that the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University were the first to introduce spirituals to the public. In 1871–1875 these signers gave many concerts in the United States and throughout Europe, and in the process raised one hundred fifty thousand dollars for the university, traveling through England, Scotland, and Germany, with the queen of England and the emperor of Germany among those who heard their voices. Johnson asks whether their level of success artistically and monetarily would have been possible if their songs were imitations of European folk music or adaptations of European airs. This discussion of the authorship of spirituals is offered as a reminder of the dominant culture’s constant negating in its attempts to define the subaltern. “They” can never do or produce anything good—even when they produce something stellar!

James Cone, the primary creator of and contributor to Black theology, considers the theological significance of the African-American spiritual. For Cone, the African-American spiritual is inextricably rooted in the lived experience of enslaved Africans on American soil. He believes that no theological understanding or interpretation of the spirituals is possible without a clear understanding of the cultural milieu from which these songs burst forth. It is essential to understand the brokenness of this historical

294 Ibid., 14–16.
295 Ibid., 17.
296 Cone, Spirituals and the Blues, 20.
situation, with its auction blocks, whipping posts, and discursive arguments regarding the humanity or inhumanity of enslaved Africans. Essential from Cone’s perspective, prior to valid interpretation, one must wrestle with the absurdity of being legally defined as both property and person.  

Cone explores the spirituals from two major theological categories: God and Jesus Christ and God and Black suffering. From Cone’s perspective, enslaved Africans viewed slavery as a contradiction to the very will of God. Slavery and its construct of “the Black nobody,” which the dominating culture sought to instill in the minds of enslaved Africans, was a direct contradiction to the divine revelation received that the enslaved perceived themselves to be “children of God.” Enslaved Africans viewed God as the final determinant of righteousness and believed that, in God’s own time, the injustice perpetrated by Whites would be weighed in the scales of divine justice and found wanting. The biblical passages that affirm God’s righteousness and the divine reversals of the oppressed became the central themes of the spirituals.

Cone assists us when he takes up the issue of theodicy, or the pervasive nature of evil in the world and the absence of divine reversal, in the discussion of God and Black suffering. In his chapter on God and Black suffering, Cone suggests that the existential horizon of enslaved Africans parallels that of biblical Judah, and he provides examples of prolonged and unjust suffering in the books of Job and Habakkuk. He makes the point

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297 Ibid., 20–21.  
298 Ibid., 33–34.  
299 Ibid., 21.
that resolving this dilemma does not necessarily present itself in direct situational change. In other words, prolonged suffering can occur and injustice may be rampant for lengthy periods of time; however, God may choose not to reverse these situations. Cone suggests that resolution does come in the same form as it appears in the biblical texts—it resolves through the God encounter. For Cone, and for many enslaved Africans and their descendants, there is a capacity to endure prolonged unjust suffering if, in the midst of it all, one can encounter God. In Cone’s explanation, we also find a key to the underlying power of African-American spirituals and the importance of cathartic worship in the Historical Black Church, the encounter with God through the Holy Ghost. For a majority of Black worshippers, they have not experienced “church” until there is a clear move of the Holy Spirit. This is, in part, a visceral, transcending emotive experience that can occur at any point in the service, clearly announcing the presence of God in the house and in fellowship with the worshippers.

**Pertinent, Mirroring Conversations**

**Hananiah and Jeremiah, Malcolm X and Bayard Rustin**

The similarity between conversations ancient, modern, and postmodern is most striking, particularly as it relates to issues of empire, domination, and resistance. Such is the conversation between Hananiah and Jeremiah, where the two prophets, perhaps viewed with equal status, advocate opposing positions of resistance—one advocating the resistance of nationalism, the other advocating assimilation. In his article, Mark W.

300 Ibid., 56.
Bartusch writes that the details of the narrative in Jeremiah 28 suggest that what is at stake in the conflictual conversation between Hananiah and Jeremiah is not some theological principle but rather honor.\textsuperscript{301} Bartusch argues that by understanding the values of shame and honor in the ancient world, contemporary interpreters have greater accuracy interpreting the message of biblical authors in their own social, political, religious, and cultural contexts. The author’s thesis is that the encounter witnessed is Jeremiah and Hananiah engaged in a defense of honor, where Jeremiah is ultimately honored and Hananiah is revealed to be a liar and ultimately dishonored. From the author’s perspective, the primary goal of this exchange between the two prophets is to resolve an immediate crisis over prophetic leadership of Judah and Jerusalem at the beginning of the sixth century.

Bartusch provides a general overview of the time when the notion of false prophets and false prophecy appears in ancient Israel. The author concludes that the phenomenon of false prophecy, later canonized in Deuteronomy 18, had its origins in the cultural context of Judah in the late seventh and early sixth century BCE, noting that the book of Jeremiah includes frequent use of the Hebrew word \textit{sheqer}, meaning falsehood or a lie. He dates the book of Jeremiah as being composed during the sixth century BCE.

Bartusch views the very presence of these prophets/intermediaries as social indicators of the time when they appeared. In other words, prophets/intermediaries are most often present when communities are experiencing seasons of appreciable social

\textsuperscript{301} Mark W. Bartusch, “From Honor Challenge to False Prophecy: Rereading Jeremiah 28’s Story of Prophetic Conflict in Light of Social-Science Models,” \textit{Currents in Theology and Mission} 36, No. 6 (2009), 455–463.
change and instability, including experiences such as economic upheaval, cross-cultural contact, natural disasters, and war. Noting that many ancient societies interpreted such events as evidence of divine displeasure, they sought a means to communicate with the gods in order to determine a solution to the divine wrath or to discover the divine will. To this end, Bartusch is not surprised by what he sees as “a surging number of prophets at work in Judah” in the late six and seven centuries, each competing to be viewed as a true prophet speaking the word of Yahweh.302

Noting the leisurely down-tempo of culture changes, Bartusch presumes that the sociocultural context of the Hebrew Bible, during ancient Israel’s monarchy, strongly resembles that of the New Testament. In this context, honor may be ascribed or acquired. Honor is understood to be one’s own claim to worthiness within a given societal context. Such a claim, however, must be validated by the community in which one resides. Acquired honor is the claim combined with social recognition emerging from an ongoing social interaction known as challenge and riposte. A challenge may be viewed as any effort to impugn the honor of another. One might be challenged by word, action, or gesture, and either positively or negatively. Riposte denotes the response/reaction from the individual challenged or some type of retort. The ability to positively counter a challenge increases one’s own honor. The loser of the encounter suffers a corresponding diminishing of honor. Two conditions are essential to this process. First, a challenge can take place only between social equals.303 Second, the challenge must be issued in a public

302 Ibid., 457.
303 Ibid., 458.
setting. In true patriarchal form, honor can be ascribed only to men; women are recipients of shame, both shameful and shameless.

Bartusch recognizes Hananiah and Jeremiah as equals, while at the same time suggesting that prophets operated at varying levels within a given social context. Perhaps, in this instance, the author is providing a more sociopolitical distinction. For Bartusch, some prophets are more central compared to others that are more peripheral. Given Jeremiah’s birthplace and his association with the priests who were in Anathoth, Bartusch positions this prophet as an outsider to the Jerusalem establishment. With less evidence, Bartusch identifies Hananiah as a central intermediary, providing counsel to King Zedekiah and the priests of the Jerusalem establishment.

Additional support for Bartusch’s perspective can be found in the narrative. For example, Zedekiah does not appear to listen to Jeremiah. In a premature reduction of his character, the king might simply be referred to as a constant, unrelentingly iterated inquiry: “Is there any word from the Lord?” Repeatedly Jeremiah provides a word of surrender and assimilation, which is always met by royal resistance. Not only does the king appear not to listen to Jeremiah, but also he never utilizes the prophet’s advice, even though he is the person inquiring and he has been specifically directed by the oracle to do so. In no circumstance does he accept the advice of Jeremiah. Perhaps the reason for this resistance is that Zedekiah views Jeremiah as a peripheral prophet. This level of indifference, however, appears stronger than that which a sociocultural tradition might support and justify. Such a level of indifference is perhaps rooted in some other ideological positioning. A revisiting of this question will emerge when we consider the second pertinent conversation between Zedekiah and Jeremiah.
Clearly, the princes of Judah did not treat Jeremiah as a central prophet. They determined his life to be without consequence and expendable. Jeremiah may well have needed a new sign act—a placard saying “Prophetic Lives Matter.”

Brueggemann views Jeremiah 28-29 somewhat differently. Distancing chapters 27 and 28 chronologically from chapter 26, he sets these chapters at the beginning of Zedekiah’s reign in 597 BCE. He suggests that the initial wave of Jewish exiles have been sent to Babylon and the temple vessels have been removed. He suggests that the larger question of the invincibility of Jerusalem has been answered with a resounding “No!” Given these factors, Brueggemann suggests that the central question argued in chapter 28 is, “How long will this displacement last?” The confrontation between Hananiah and Jeremiah is a theopolitical controversy concerning how long Yahweh will permit Babylon to have its way against Judah. Yahweh giving Babylon permission to dominate Judah poses a theological question. For Brueggemann, the capacity and the durability of the empire are a matter of Realpolitik. The central issue of the biblical passage rests on the distinction, if there is one, between the theological question of Yahweh’s permission for Babylon to conquer Judah versus the political question of Babylon’s capacity and durability to sustain its dominance.

From a postcolonial perspective, the encounter between Hananiah and Jeremiah may also be viewed as an ideological debate concerning nationalism versus assimilation. While the prophet Jeremiah is often labeled as being pro-Babylon, in reality, his true stance may not be so much pro-Babylon as it is pro-assimilation. For Jeremiah, the

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distinction that Brueggemann has argued does not exist. For the prophet, there is no distin-
tinction between the will of Yahweh and the capacity of the empire. Jeremiah’s concern
is Judah’s response.\footnote{Ibid.} For the prophet, the will of Yahweh is clear. Yahweh has given
dominating political authority to Babylon. Those who refuse to accept Babylonian
domiance will be subject to the sword, famine, and pestilence. Brueggemann argues that
these are not terms which should be understood supernaturally. He views them as
predictable results of an occupying army.\footnote{Ibid., 245.}

The role of prophetic Black preaching is to offer an astute sociopolitical direction
for the masses of Black people. Throughout African American history, leaders rise and
fall in significance based on their ability to articulate a clear path of uplift. This is the
central thread that runs through the leadership of the Powells, Rustin, and King. What is
also clear is that the majority of Black preachers have no envisioned direction for Black,
queer individuals, so we much shun our internalized oppression and rise to the challenge
of leadership.

Jeremiahs’ political perspective is the same. The outcome of this decision will
result in either life or death for Judah. It is for this reason that he argues assimilation. In
chapter 29, Jeremiah clarifies his political position when he writes a letter to the elders,
priests, prophets, and all the others who were carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon by
Nebuchadnezzar. His recommendation to them was to build houses and live in them;
plant gardens and eat their fruit; find wives and produce sons and daughters, and, when

\footnote{Ibid.}

\footnote{Ibid., 245.}
your children are of age, find wives for your sons and husbands for your daughters; settle in and multiply; and finally, seek the peace of the city of Babylon and pray for it as your relationship with it has been changed, for in its peace you will find your peace (Jer. 29:1-7).

From the perspective of the Black hermeneutic, this debate of nationalism versus assimilation mirrors the historical intellectual debate of many African-American leaders, including Bayard Rustin, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. The central question is, “When strategizing to acquire equality in a colonized setting, what is the most productive route to true citizenship and its related privileges?” Is it to retain the nationalistic fervor and unity of a marginalized people, or is it to assimilate into the dominating culture? The second strategic concern, similar to the first, is the degree to which the marginalized engage in resisting the dominating forces or melding into accommodation.

Born Malcolm Little on May 19, 1925, in Omaha, Nebraska, Malcolm X was one of eight children born to Earl and Louise Little.307 His father was a preacher and a leading member of the local chapter of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, the organization headed by Marcus Garvey, the leading Black nationalist. His father’s activism was apparently well-known in the community, and, as a result, the family was frequently harassed by White supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). In fact, when Malcolm was four years old, all of the family’s windows were smashed by KKK members. Earl Little interpreted this as a dangerous signal and moved his family from

Omaha to East Lansing, Michigan. Unfortunately, relationships with White supremacist groups did not get better. In fact, they got worse.

Shortly after the family moved to East Lansing, a racist mob set their home on fire. The town’s White emergency responders failed to respond. They did come to the house, along with members of the local police department, however, to watch the structure burn to the ground. Two years later, Earl Little’s body was discovered on nearby railroad tracks. To add insult to injury, the local police ruled his death a suicide, voiding the life insurance policy he had taken out to protect his surviving family members. The culmination of these events proved too stressful for Louise Little, and she was committed to a mental institution in 1937.

After a seven-year period of incarceration, Malcolm X, who had converted to the Nation of Islam (NOI), moved to Detroit, Michigan, where he became a major leader of the NOI. His goal was to expand the movement to a national level. In 1960 he established the newspaper of the NOI, *Muhammad Speaks*, as a promotional tool. He became the leading minister for Temple No. 7 in Harlem, New York; Temple No. 11 in Boston, Massachusetts; and established new temples in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Hartford, Connecticut.

Malcolm X was a gifted and inspirational speaker. His message to the masses of Black people was to shake off racism “by any means necessary,” which included violence. This was, of course, in direct opposition to the nonviolent and leading political

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308 Ibid., 25.
309 Ibid.
posture of Martin Luther King Jr. From Malcolm X’s perspective, history did not support the idea of a “peaceful revolution,” and he could not envision a “turn-the-other-cheek revolution.” While this clash against the dominant Black ideological posture gained Malcolm X many critics, it also gained him many supporters. Malcolm X began this effort in 1952, and within eight years the Nation of Islam had grown from four hundred to forty thousand followers.

This biographical sketch of Malcolm X is important because, somewhere between his self-education and his lived experience, he concluded that the level of hatred for Blacks, the violence that Whites were willing to perpetrate against them, and the integration of these factors into the fiber of the country prevented the possibility of an integrated, egalitarian society. What his experience also demonstrates, however, is that Black unification or Black nationalism is a tremendously viable and achievable response to this circumstance.

My argument here is that, just as Black nationalists articulated their radical position, Black, queer, inspired leaders must prepare themselves theologically and ideologically to come to the public square and advocate a position of sociopolitical equality, contradicting the limited insight and exposition of mainline biblical interpretation and promoting a Black, queer, informed theological presence.

The Zedekiah and Jeremiah Conversation: Resistance Versus Accommodation

After Jeremiah is released from the cistern, King Zedekiah arranges to meet with the prophet in the temple (Jer. 38:14). This appears to be a last-minute, final check-in with the prophet to see if Yahweh has changed his mind regarding the projected outcome of devastation facing Judah. It is a very rich dialogical exchange between king and
prophet, as each reveals to the other his vulnerability (Jer. 38:14). Each man is cautious (Jer. 38:15). Jeremiah is cautious because he has just narrowly escaped death (Jer. 38:15). The king is cautious because he is caught between his failed policy to resist Babylonian domination and his inability to surrender (Jer. 38:19). Carroll makes the point that there is a significant difference between an act of surrender by the king versus an ordinary citizen. In this case, the difference is dramatic, as it is Zedekiah who is responsible for Judah being under siege. He has been the primary instigator of resistance and is aligned with the princes of Judah in this policy. Encountering Jeremiah, Zedekiah demands the prophet to provide all the information he has, divinely revealed or otherwise, and to hide nothing (Jer. 38:14). As it relates to the truth of the matter, the prophet has his own concerns.

Jeremiah is concerned for his life, which he expresses openly to the king. Furthermore, there is the historical relationship of their discussions, which suggests that Zedekiah has never listened to, nor followed Jeremiah’s advice (Jer. 22:1–5, 34:1–7, 37:7–10, 21:1–10). The prophet maneuvers the king into a solemn oath to protect his life before he reveals what he knows. With the promise of life assured, Jeremiah then delivers the good and bad news.

The bad news is that Yahweh’s position regarding the fate of Judah is unchanged. The good news, however, is a means of escape for the king—surrender. Jeremiah tells the king that, if he surrenders, his life will be spared; if he does not, the city will be burned and he will be captured by Nebuchadnezzar. Since he is a vassal king caught in rebellion,

310 Carroll, Jeremiah, 686.
the probability of a merciful outcome is slim. It is at this point that the king reveals a deep-seated fear that, if he is handed over to the Jews who have already been exiled, they will physically abuse him (Jer. 38:19).

Jeremiah does not persuade Zedekiah to surrender. Zedekiah remains resistant. Whether we employ a Black or postcolonial hermeneutic, resistance may be understood as a well-utilized tool of the oppressed. This biblical conversation, however, further mirrors the debates between Malcolm X and Bayard Rustin and reflects the ideological difference between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. King, an integrationist, sought through open demonstrations, sign acts, and articulate preaching, based on the biblical text and morality of the United States Constitution, to preserve African-American lives within the current structures of society in the 1960s. Malcolm X stood in resistance to all societal structures and sought complete separation. Perhaps Malcolm understood the indomitable nature of empire.

Chapter 5:
Of Binaries and Transformative Power

If I couldn’t say a word ... I’d just wave my hand.
—Traditional

This dissertation seeks to address the negative, discriminatory impact of homophobia in Historic Black Churches, perpetuated by Black preachers, visited on Black queer males specifically and Black GLBTQIA people generally. I argue that this behavior is observed most readily among religious leaders and pastors of Black churches who have adopted Black, cis, dominating and/or benevolent patriarchal leadership models, which are historically rooted in White, cis, dominating and/or benevolent models of patriarchy. I argue that without throwing off the negative, projected stereotypes of “wildness” and “uncontrollable buck” and images of hypermasculinity, many Black males chose the White, cis, dominating patriarchy model as their primary expression of masculinity. This model has two distinguishing characteristics. First, this model views violence as a means of control. Second, dominating patriarchs generally have no interest in the empowerment of women. These models of masculinity have been adopted for both personal performance and as models of leadership.

312 hooks, *We Real Cool*, 11.
313 Ibid., 4.
The emergence of Black religious leaders at the turn of the twentieth century occurred at a time of great social, political, and geographical change, a time of great disruption—from Emancipation to the Great Migration. During this period, many communal values and traditional mores were tested, but the prevailing attitude of leading pastors was to assimilate and adopt a narrative of civility. Mimicking, uneducated, pastors, mentored into leader of smaller churches, followed this lead. Prior to the adoption of the narrative of civility, Black churches were closer to being institutions of communal inclusion. Now, in the first quarter of the century, they began to overtly reject “blues and queer bodies.” These rejected blues and queer bodies are represented by men and women who wrestled with the realities of Black existence through a different lens, a lens given less to anticipating heavenly blessings—pie in the sky by and by—and more to achieving some blessings down on the ground, while you’re still around.

As previously mentioned, a majority of the Black male laity, as well as religious leaders, chose to operate from one of these two binary models of patriarchy. In a recent discussion with Dr. Kevin McGruder, coeditor of Witness, I mentioned the lens of benevolent and dominating Black patriarchy. He suggested that it could readily be applied to the historical and current pastors of Abyssinian Baptist Church.314

For example, he identified Rev. William Spellman, who became the pastor in 1856 after the church had sold its first building on Anthony Street to avoid it being foreclosed. Spellman navigated the church through rented spaces until they purchased a

building in 1863 on Waverly Place in Greenwich Village.\textsuperscript{315} From this place, Abyssinian
began to grow into one of the leading Black congregations in New York City. By the
time Spellman left in 1885, the church had a congregation of fifteen hundred, but
Spellman’s dominating style had divided the congregation. When he left he took the
records of the church and tried to take the Abyssinian name with him.

Spellman was succeeded by Rev. Robert Wynn, who seems to have been a
benevolent patriarch who continued to grow the church; he encouraged the move to
Harlem, which he saw as the future for Black people in New York.\textsuperscript{316} When the church
body refused to go, he resigned in 1902. Wynn was followed by Charles Satchell Morris,
who moved the church in 1903 to a larger building on Fortieth Street. He had health
problems that led him to resign in 1908. He was then followed by the Powells. Adam
Powell Sr. was a benevolent patriarch, but fully aware of the power he held as senior
pastor.

Additionally, McGruder outlined a very interesting pattern regarding these
binaries. He suggested that, beginning at the turn of the twentieth century, one can
identify benevolent patriarch pastors who are builders followed by dominant patriarch
pastors who, to some extent, squander the work of their predecessors. McGruder starts
with Adam Clayton Powell Sr., whom he deemed “literally” responsible for the building
of Abyssinian’s church and community house in Harlem. After its opening in 1923,
Powell skillfully entered into collaborations with a wide range of White and Black, social

\textsuperscript{315} McNeil et al., \textit{Witness}, 27

\textsuperscript{316} McNeil et al., \textit{Witness}, 59
and religious organizations to create thriving programs in the community house that helped Harlem residents navigate the Depression. Powell Jr. became an assistant to Powell Sr. during this period and initially continued to build on his work. When Powell Jr. went to Congress, he had assistant pastors, most notably Rev. David Licorish, who kept the operations of the church moving forward, but, in his later years, particularly as he faced congressional investigations, the “fair weather” Abyssinian members left. At the time of Powell’s death in 1972, McGruder says, the church was struggling with greatly reduced membership and shaky finances.

Enter Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor, who followed the benevolent patriarch role that, according to McGruder, was much in alignment with Powell Sr.\(^\text{317}\) For example, during his first five years, giving at Abyssinian tripled, even though the membership remained the same. He renovated the church building, helped raise money to purchase and install a world-class organ, and healed a congregation that was struggling. By 1987, when McGruder joined Abyssinian, Dr. Proctor was beginning to move the church to look outward again, particularly at the many vacant buildings in the surrounding neighborhood. He was instrumental in establishing the Abyssinian Development Corporation (where McGruder served as director of real estate development from 1991 to 1996 and as chief operating officer from 1996 to 1997), which began to renovate buildings and drew on the Social Gospel message utilized by Powell Sr.

Dr. Proctor retired in 1989 and was succeeded by Dr. Calvin O. Butt III, who clearly fits the dominant patriarch profile. Very similar to Powell Jr. and having served as

\(^\text{317}\) McNeil et al., *Witness*, 250
his apprentice as a youth minister, he seemed well-equipped to lead. Unfortunately, more recently, McGruder suggests that his style has been a detriment to the congregation. Because of the large attendance of congregational numbers on any given Sunday morning, the problems that McGruder sees are not apparent to non-members or people who have arrived recently, but, from McGruder’s perspective, Abyssinian is a congregation in decline. McGruder points to the Abyssinian Development Corporation, which exists in name only after a series of financial scandals and failure to submit five years of audits as required by city funders. Additionally, the Abyssinian church bylaws used to require the pastor to resign at age seventy, which Dr. Butts will reach in two or three years, but a few years ago new bylaws were approved, which are yet to be reviewed, so it is not known whether the age limit for pastors still stands. McGruder highlighted this action as perhaps the “ultimate example of a dominant patriarch.”

I have included this listing of Black, cis, dominating and benevolent leaders to demonstrate their prevalence among African-American pastors and religious leaders. However, as we can see from the listing, these binary models have lost their effectiveness. A much more progressive leadership style is needed. I propose a new model: Black, queer, inspired leadership.

**Black, Queer, Inspired Leadership: Bayard Rustin and Ebed-Melech**

Bayard Rustin and Ebed-Melech are examples of Black, queer, inspired leadership—each man a driving force, full of self-knowledge, discernment, agency, creativity, liminality, and, to varying degrees, power tempered by compassion. Rustin was more clearly knowledgeable regarding nonviolent strategies than King, yet he freely offered the power of his arresting techniques to King and to the Civil Rights Move-
Rustin was an inspired Black, queer, inspired leader before his encounters with King. It appears that Rustin never bought into one of the primary goals of racism, sexism, and discrimination: to convince the marginalized that they are powerless—for the marginalized to convince themselves that they have no capacity to alter the discourse of dominance in which they find themselves, to persuade themselves that there is nothing they can do. Rustin appears never to have bought into this false consciousness. Rustin believed in the power of agency to disrupt the inertia of society’s daily sense of normality.

Among his various arrests and periods of incarceration, Rustin spent twenty-two days on a chain gang in North Carolina. As you may recall, he was charged with sitting next to a White man on a bus, thereby breaking North Carolina’s Jim Crow laws. North Carolina was, in fact, choosing to ignore recent federal law prohibiting discrimination in interstate travel. After his release, Rustin wrote of this dehumanizing experience.

What was most offensive to Rustin was what he called “the degrading condition of feeling, ‘I am not a person: I am a thing to be used.’” The guards saw virtually no difference between the Black prisoners that they held in check and the tools that were

318 Levine, Bayard Rustin, 79.
319 Ibid., 74.
320 Ibid., 63.
used in labor. Could there be a more dehumanizing experience? Could there be an experience that would make one feel more worthless or powerless? Yet, Rustin converted his paper into a five-part series, published by the *New York Post* in 1949. Shortly after its publication, the chain gang was discontinued in North Carolina.

Rustin’s *New York Post* series was not the lone factor in the decision to discontinue North Carolina’s chain gang, but it appeared at a critical point and certainly tilted the dominant thinking in the direction of discontinuance.

This achievement by Rustin exemplifies the goal of this dissertation: to advocate to Black queer males that our advancement toward self-actualization and the transformation of others is linked to our ability to discard the negativity that has been projected onto us. We cannot afford to live as if we are discards and, as such, do nothing. We cannot know the full power of our capacity for inspired leadership until we initiate our unique personal agency as Black, queer, inspired leaders. Further, until we employ our agency, we cannot know to what extent our actions will contribute to the theosociopolitical reshaping of Black churches and the larger society.

**Ebed-Melech**

The narrative of Ebed-Melech and the rescue of Jeremiah is a racially subjugated biblical text. One of the primary clues supporting this position is the fact that so little has been written about him. There seems to be a disproportionate lack of attention given the significant performance of the character. In some instances, his story has been ignored completely. Yet this flies in the face of literary criticism as it relates to characters and

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322 Ibid.
their value in the narrative. Since when has a named character been without significance? Since when has a character with a speaking role been viewed as irrelevant? From a theological perspective, since when has a character who literally and figuratively rescues the protagonist, the figurative word of God, not been afforded appropriate attention? Since when has an individual to whom Yahweh speaks been deemed dispensable? Few if any examples come to mind. This is the nature of Western hegemonic biblical criticism and interpretation as it relates to people of color and people deemed queer. Biblical commentators actualize in their interpretation not only heteronormativity but also White supremacy.

The most overt example of racial bias in the biblical narrative of Ebed-Melech’s rescue of Jeremiah is the interpretation of Joseph Allen Wainwright and Murie Hardill. This is an interpretation where Zedekiah scorns Ebed-Melech for leaving his position and the authors have Ebed-Melech speak in broken Hebrew. Here, Ebed-Melech is depicted as a man incapable of discernment, creativity, or implementation of a planning process. In this interpretation, there is no mention of Yahweh’s blessing of Ebed-Melech.

I raise this example of an overt, racially biased interpretation as an example of the limitation of the White, cis, literary imagination as it encounters a Bible text of the Black and queer. However, the product of such an encounter need not always be so blatant. To ignore the text completely is also a step toward its marginalization. Ebed-Melech was blessed by Yahweh. Perhaps Wainwright’s hermeneutic may have been overshadowed as he visually perceived Ebed-Melech’s appearance: He describes this servant to the King as

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323 Wainwright and Hardill, *The Fall of a City*, 114.
being “black as the darkness.”\textsuperscript{324} It should be noted that this imaginary image is non-textual.

What did Ebed-Melech fail to do to be appropriately recognized? As always with issues/discussions of race and discrimination, the focal point is placed on the racialized other, not the individual or system that is discriminating. If we reverse our focus to examine the systemic, we arrive at a profoundly insightful but alarming understanding.

In her monograph, \textit{Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination}, Toni Morrison (born 1931), 1993 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, provides several significant insights into this issue. Morrison reverses the focus, extending the study of American literature to view the mindset and literary imagination of whiteness. Morrison examines “the impact of notions of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability and availability on nonblacks who held, resisted, explored, or altered those notions.”\textsuperscript{325} She moves the point of focus and reasoning from object to subject, from the described to the one imagining the description. With Morrison’s hermeneutic in mind, what are the implications for the Ebed-Melech narrative?

It appears that the White literary imagination could make no rational sense of this narrative because the man who rescues the protagonist is both Black and queer. Subsequently, Ebed-Melech, with rare exceptions, has been ignored or diminished to slave status. This point is significant because it calls us to reexamine the manner in which

\textsuperscript{324} Ibid.

people of color and queer people have been interpreted or ignored by biblical commentators. Further, it positions us to understand that color and queerness in biblical characters set up blockages in the White interpretive imagination. In part, this is because the coloring of the biblical text has been misconstrued, i.e., that most of the biblical characters are people of color.

Contrary to the Wainwright and Hardill interpretation, Ebed-Melech was blessed by Yahweh, and, through him, all queer people are blessed. Yahweh blessed Ebed-Melech with deliverance from those whom he feared and from false prophets (Jer. 39:17). This understanding, should we grasp it, is a complete reversal of generations of false teaching. Queer people are not an abomination; rather, they are a blessed people, already delivered from every false prophet they have encountered or will encounter. Ebed-Melech models for us what it means to be a Black, queer, inspired leader, a leader whom Yahweh commends for his batach or complete security in God and God alone.

**Linking Ebed-Melech to Jesus the Christ**

Ebed-Melech and his salvific act can be linked to Jesus the Christ in three distinct ways: they share a literary connection through the hero’s journey, they share the commonality of being queer, and they share the responsibility of being “signs of the time.” I have observed that in the book of Jeremiah and in the Acts of the Apostles there is a Black queer presence as a higher revelation of our understanding of God is revealed and in the process of challenge. In these two books, Black queer people are present when God decided to lift her skirts and flirt with her humanity, revealing some previously undisclosed nature of the Godself. In those times, as we shall see, Black queer men are present. But, let us first consider the hero’s journey.
Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) was an author and lecturer in comparative mythology and comparative religion. Campbell identified across various cultures the presence of certain archetypes and mythical figures. One such archetype is the hero and the stages of the hero’s journey. The hero is the individual who goes out and does great deeds on behalf of the group, tribe, or civilization. Campbell identifies several stages of this journey, including leaving the ordinary world, the call to adventure, meeting a mentor, the ordeal, the reward, the road back, resurrection, and the elixir. While the hero is experiencing the external journey, an internal journey is also occurring. Internally, the hero begins with a limited awareness of the problem, then moves to an increased awareness of the need for change, to experiencing fear, to overcoming fear, to a commitment to change, to preparing for major change, to facing the big change with feelings of life and death, to accepting the consequences of new life, to mastery.  

Campbell is not without his critics, particularly among religious scholars. Many see a disconnect between his anthropology of myths and their purported truth and his status as a professor of literature. Others critique his political views and their inconsistency. For example, his love for Germany appears to have blurred his

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understanding of the Hitler regime. Still others accuse him of being both anti-Semitic and anti-Black.\textsuperscript{328}

A fleeting knowledge of the journeys of Jesus and Ebed-Melech show a high degree of similarity. The two men are definitely heroes, and they have both engaged the hero’s journey.

As for Ebed-Melech and Jesus being eunuchs, Jesus said,

“there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother’s womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it” (Matthew 19:12).

In the nineteenth chapter of Matthew, Jesus addresses the inquiries of the Pharisees, who were engaging him on the question of divorce. Jesus explains his answer in the context of hetero-normative gender and sexuality. And then he says, “All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given.” In other words, not everybody can see this; or, to say it another way, not everyone is a believer in this truth. The truth is that there are queer people out there.

It is in this conversation that Jesus defends his sexual expression. He is talking and teaching on marriage, even as he is unmarried. Jesus is a non-procreative male. So, wanting to be transparent, Jesus identifies himself as queer. There is nothing that I am aware of that would suggest that Jesus was castrated at any point. As a non-procreative male, it is most likely that he identified as either queer from his mother’s womb or queer for the kingdom’s sake. Jesus and Ebed-Melech affirm their identities as queer males.

\textsuperscript{328} Ibid., 131.
I am intrigued by this observation regarding the book of Jeremiah and the Acts of the Apostles. In each instance, biblical scholars are faced with what might be interpreted as a higher, pronounced revelation of the divine nature. In both books, I find it interesting that Black queer males are present. Consider the broader story of the book of Jeremiah. It is a story of dominance, violence, political and theological disruption. It is the story of the length and breadth to which men, with their wives (though no flesh and blood females appear in the book), will go to prevent a loss of privilege. The depth to which credible characters will lie is staggering; even leading characters lie under the pressure of life and death. In such instances, we learn that their espoused morality is totally fluid. It depends on where the pressure falls. In a time of crisis, such as in the book of Jeremiah, the only clear value is survival—and survival at any cost.

Additionally, a major revelatory theological and sociopolitical adjustment occurred for Judah with the loss of the kingdom. This loss eradicated the validity of royal theology. Both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel had held the position that the symbol of its right relationship with Yahweh was kingship and the temple. The simultaneous destruction of these two institutions presented the mind of a god whom they did not know. They knew the God of Abraham and Isaac, even though Isaac was not the firstborn and stole his brother’s birthright. They knew the God of Moses, who led them from captivity to freedom. They knew the God of David, who placed him on the throne.

But they were not familiar with worshipping a god in the midst of a lost kingdom, and
temple. What kind of god is this? So God, in the process of redefining herself, clarifies
that she is not just the God of Israel, she is the God of the whole world. And while in
their state of confusion, Judah would kill the prophet. Yet, enter stage right—a Black
queer man (Jer. 38-39).

Hundreds of years later, Judah’s understanding of God would be challenged once
again. God would decide to become flesh and dwell among her people. She would enter
the world as a non-White baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger, and, on
the far side of a Jerusalem field, angels would herald her entrance. God made manifest as
a non-White baby, who grew up to be a non-procreative male of color, a baby of color
who would be taken to the darkness of Africa that he might be shielded from his enemies
and rise to his calling to be the light of the world.

Thirdly, in a matter of a few years, God would reveal a new dimension of the
Godself as Savior of the world. God would leave the heavens, come to the earth, take on
human flesh, be crucified, buried, and resurrected. In this process, through the Holy
Spirit, a new order called the church would be established. When the church flung open
its doors to the world, its first gentile member would be a Black, queer eunuch (Acts
8:27).³³⁰

³³⁰ Mona West, “The Story of the Ethiopian Eunuch,” in Guest, Queer Bible Commentary, 572.
Chapter 6:

Epilogue

*It’s the Lord's blessings ... we now enjoy!*
—Traditional

*A Paradigm for Progressive Black Church Movement*

The Reverend Dr. Willa Grant Battle, founding pastor of the House of Refuge, now Grace Temple Deliverance Center of Minneapolis, Minnesota, and a former mentor, describes a familiar scene of mobility for African Americans in the rural South in the first quarter of the twentieth century. She recounts that, when a family was fortunate enough or necessity demanded a move from one house to another, most families utilized a well-known process and strategy. First, the family wagon would be brought around to the front of the house, placed as even as possible with the front porch and front door to facilitate the loading process. Then all the family’s possessions, box by box, would be loaded into the wagon. Once this process was completed, the family mule(s) would be brought around to the front of the house and hitched to the front of the wagon. With the mule(s) securely in place, the last activity to be completed before the family boarded the wagon was to round up the dogs. One by one, the dogs would be tied to the very back of the wagon. With this task accomplished, family members would board the wagon and generally the male, head of the household, would take the reins, steer the mule(s) to the road, heading in the direction of the family’s new dwelling.
Somewhere between a half-mile and three-quarters of a mile down the road, it would become clear to the dogs that the family was actually moving, leaving the homestead, heading elsewhere. Once this recognition sank in, the dogs would begin to bark and growl, alerting each other to their impinging apocalypse. As their message becomes clear to the canine communal, resistance would break out! Some dogs would attempt to turn their backs to the wagon, dig in their claws, eyes bulging, saliva dripping, straining with all their might to stop the wagon. After all, they had bones buried in the yard, bones they were being forced to leave. Despite their arduous efforts of resistance, they were, in the final analysis, no competition for the power of the mule(s). The mule(s), often with blinders on, never saw the dogs and may only have heard their growls as in a distance; but, dismissing them, continued to function as programmed, pulling the family’s possessions down the dusty road.

Dr. Battle, a dominating matriarch, would often tell this story during periods of discontent and disagreement within the congregation, positioning her opponents as “those concerned about bones” and her leadership as the “driving force,” taking the church family to a better place. She was then and is now an inspired leader and pastoral genius. Often, after telling the story, she would lead the congregation into a period of sustained prayer that our hearts and minds might come to one accord. It is in that same spirit of unity that I now offer this prayer for Black churches.

**Self-Knowledge**

I pray for an ever increasing sense of self-knowledge: that you might fully come to see yourselves among the world’s greatest repositories of identity, culture, history, and
theology; that your remembrance will be enlivened, that you will continue to stand as Black churches have been for generations, the touchstone of African-American identity.

When the Supreme Court of the United States spewed forth the venomous postulate of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), stating as law the policy of “separate but equal,” every expression in the broader society sought to reinforce this negativity. *Plessy*, with its production of Black/White water fountains, Black/White bathrooms, and Black/White schools and segregated seating, even as it authorized the overt discrimination at will of Whites over Blacks, was an unjust law of the land—American apartheid, a federal legal pronouncement to Black men and women, boys and girls, saying that you are nothing and no one and there is nothing about your personage that a White person has to respect.

Yet, under the shadow of your wing, Black families across the nation could gather on Sunday mornings or in midweek services and hear a startling yet nurturing contradiction. It was your preaching, praying, and singing, like a lone steel bell clamoring in the darkness, that conveyed the divine truth: In contradiction to the dominating message, know beyond the shadow of a doubt that you are somebody! You are God’s child! I pray that not only will you continue to serve as a touchstone of identity but also, through your pedagogy, you will cultivate men and women toward Black, queer, inspired leadership.

**Discernment**

I pray for the keenness of your capacity for discernment. That your discernment will achieve a level of excellence resembling that which recorded in Heb. 4:12: “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” That beyond the rhetoric of bathrooms
and birth certificates and the historical/cultural binaries of heteronormativity, you will discern what is the perfect will of God for all of God’s people. Remembering the primacy of the love ethic, I pray that you will reclaim your history of marginalization and, with your transcendence, seek to be inclusive of all men and women of every nation, tongue, tribe, and sexual expression.

Agency

I pray that, as you exercise your three major components of worship—preaching, music, and prayer—you will experience a fresh spiritual anointing. I pray that your preaching may be articulated as a critical religious message, delivered in a communal context; a message of cultural relevance, informative, educational, entertaining, and motivating. I pray that your preaching continues to be a biblically centered message delivered in the vernacular of the people to whom the message is intended. I pray that it continues to be enlivening and, at its best, reaches the listeners on three distinct levels of understanding: the cognitive, the intuitive, and the emotive.

But it is not only your Black preaching that invokes the Spirit of the divine to a visceral level of immanence but also the music of your worship that is designed to achieve this same end. Whether we are considering the spirituals or gospel music, Black worship music is designed to engage the emotive. Your rhythms, syncopations, glissandos, and improvisations are all designed to evoke response. I pray that in your worship you will continue to invoke the spiritual space of transcendence that lifts your worshippers beyond their circumstances.
Creativity

I pray that you will come to embrace your energies of rhythm, improvisation, and imagination in new and exciting ways and that you will fill your aisles with dance and celebration proclaiming the God-inspired liberty that you freely offer to all. I pray that you will find new and creative methods of outreach to those who stand in the shadows and margins of our society.

Liminality

I pray that you will continue to go into all the world, crossing many thresholds, building relationships and networks, where you can return and be welcomed. I pray that, as you minister your gospel message, you do so not to conquer nor to usurp but to liberate and empower.

Power Tempered by Compassion

I pray that, as you continue to minister to the most vulnerable among us, that you will do so with great compassion.
Statement of Bibliographic Method

In its most narrow sense, my dissertation may be viewed as a juxtaposition of the characteristics of two queer males of African descent, whose lived experiences are separated by more than twenty-five hundred years. Each man, in his own social orbit, experienced the impact of “othering” in response to his ethnicity and social location—African and Black and queer. Despite the trappings of the down side, each man may also be viewed as uniquely positioned to exercise his individual agency toward an act of significant social change—an act so impactful that it demanded leadership of a refined capacity, an act that only he determined or, more importantly, possessed the capacity to fulfill. To the extent that the historical record has disproportionately minimalized the significance of their contributions, this dissertation seeks to serve as a corrective.

From a broader perspective, the dissertation may also be viewed as a contextual juxtaposition of the larger societies and cultural understandings in which these two men operated. To this end, the dissertation considers the fall of Jerusalem (587 BCE) as portrayed in the book of Jeremiah over and against the Civil Rights movement of African Americans in the United States of America, 1950-1970. Each context reflects a period of appreciable social change yielding certain tropes or themes, such as prophetic preaching, prophetic leadership under the threat of assassination, sign acts and demonstrations, the use of laments and the singing of spirituals, undergirded by a theological supposition.
affirming Yahweh as the God of history. Additionally, certain crucial ideologies are publically debated, such as assimilation versus nationalism and accommodation versus resistance. Issues of power are ubiquitous. Finally, the absence of any female characters in the book of Jeremiah necessitates some minimal exploration of gender.

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