
AHR Forum
The Biography Branch Might Have Written

CLAYBORNE CARSON

THREE YEARS AFTER CORETTA SCOTT KING named me editor of her late husband's papers, Taylor Branch published the first volume of his magnificent *America in the King Years* trilogy and became a beacon for my own scholarly endeavors.¹ Appearing soon after the initial celebration of the national holiday commemorating the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., *Parting the Waters* received almost unanimous acclaim and a Pulitzer Prize, confirming that King's historical stature would rise rather than wane with time. Brilliantly highlighting King's prophetic leadership while still giving due attention to the grassroots militancy that had inspired my early scholarship, Branch's achievement discouraged thoughts that my ongoing documentation of King's life would culminate in a comparable saga combining biography and bottom-up history. Branch surrounded his protagonist with dozens of deftly drawn characters, ranging from courageous local leaders to well-meaning but often complacent John F. Kennedy administration officials who would have been surprised to learn that they were living in "the King years." I was especially pleased that he featured the brash "field secretaries" of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the innovative group that grabbed my attention as an undergraduate and later became the subject of my first book.²

Branch's recognition that King was part of a social movement beyond his control was especially evident in the second and third volumes of his trilogy, as his focus shifted from King to other figures who voiced the racial discord and political rancor of the increasingly tumultuous period from 1964 to 1968. His tendentious decision to devote a major portion of *Pillar of Fire* to Malcolm X's final years strengthened my sense that Malcolm and King warranted comparative study as unorthodox religious leaders competing with limited success to provide ideological guidance for escalating grassroots freedom struggles.³ Moreover, Branch emphasized King's role as a civil rights leader, but not to the exclusion of his broader social gospel mission,

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¹ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York, 1988); Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–65* (New York, 1998); Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965–68* (New York, 2006).

² Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981).

³ See, for example, my edition of *Malcolm X: The FBI File* (New York, 1991), and later articles such as "A 'Common Solution': Martin and Malcolm's Gulf Was Closing, but the Debate Lives On," *Emerge*, February 1998, 44–52; "Malcolm X," in John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes, eds., *American National*

displayed in his continued activism once the Selma to Montgomery March spurred passage of the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965. *At Canaan's Edge* gave ample attention to the less widely known ventures of King's final years—the Chicago campaign and the Mississippi March of 1966, his public condemnation in 1967 of Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam policies, and the Poor People's Campaign of 1968. With piercing precision, Branch depicts King as beleaguered by erstwhile allies and unrelenting enemies—the mercurial Lyndon Johnson (“treating King variously to a Texas bear hug of shared dreams or a towering, wounded snit”), the craftily paranoid J. Edgar Hoover (“Hoover's FBI was blackmailing [King] toward suicide with surveillance tapes of his private life”), the incendiary Stokely Carmichael (who “sheepishly denied reports that he had called King and Roy Wilkins ‘Uncle Toms’ in recent speeches”), as well as King's incorrigibly contentious colleagues in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (“[King] tolerated the clash of head-strong lieutenants as a necessary by-product of frontier hardship and conviction”).⁴

Yet at the end of Branch's 2,000-page narrative, I found myself wanting more—not overwrought theory and analysis, but more reflection on the single overriding question that lingers at the conclusion: Who was King, really, and how does the answer to that question help us to understand his historical significance? At the start of his project, Branch advised that he did not intend to produce a biography but instead wanted to write “a history grounded in race,” with King “at its heart” as “the best and most important metaphor for American history in the watershed postwar years.”⁵ But his detailed portrait of King transcends metaphor, and his engrossing narrative abounds with implicit biographical as well as historical insights. It is a measure of Branch's interpretive skills that his initial volume anticipated subsequent scholarship that crossed disciplinary lines to illuminate King's extraordinary intellectual and oratorical qualities and his relationship to the modern African American freedom struggle.⁶ *America in the King Years* is undoubtedly a revealing mosaic of biographical miniatures and apt anecdotes; however, it lacks the concerted exploration of identity development that distinguishes the best biographies and the sustained analysis of social and political transformation that informs the best histories. The spare comments of Branch's epilogue are frustratingly elusive, as when he observes that King's “oratory mined twin doctrines of equal souls and equal votes in

Biography (New York, 1999), 359–361; and “The Unfinished Dialogue of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 7, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 12–19.

⁴ Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 14, 197, 519, 553.

⁵ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 13.

⁶ Lewis V. Baldwin, *There Is a Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Minneapolis, 1991); Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 2000); Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia, 2006); Troy Jackson, *Becoming King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Making of a National Leader* (Lexington, Ky., 2008); Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Word That Moved America* (New York, 1995); Vincent Harding, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* (Maryknoll, N.Y., 1996); Keith D. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Its Sources* (New York, 1992); James R. Ralph, *Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993); Eric K. Sundquist, *King's Dream: The Legacy of Martin Luther King's “I Have a Dream” Speech* (New Haven, Conn., 2009); Fredrik Sunnemark, *Ring Out Freedom! The Voice of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (Bloomington, Ind., 2004); and Richard W. Wills, *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Image of God* (New York, 2009).

the common ground of nonviolence, and justice refined history until its fires dimmed for a time.”⁷ While he concedes that anti-government Reaganism eventually “became the dominant idea in American politics, as a cyclical adjustment in history shifted the emphasis of patriotic language from citizenship to command, shrinking the public space,” I would appreciate a more cogent explanation of how and why the King years gave way to the Ronald Reagan years.⁸

Although my SNCC background prepared me to appreciate Branch as a social historian, my experiences as editor of King’s papers heightened my awareness of Branch’s strengths and limitations as a biographer, even if a reticent one. His trilogy was the product of prodigious archival research of the kind that informs my edition of *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, but the anecdotes that enliven his narrative were drawn more from after-the-fact interviews (mostly his own) than from contemporaneous documents.⁹ Nonetheless, Branch understands that King’s fundamental identity derives from his roots in liberal Christian theology, and more deeply in the black Baptist church. “In the quiet recesses of my heart, I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher,” King once wrote. “This is my being and my heritage for I am also the son of a Baptist preacher, the grandson of a Baptist preacher and the great-grandson of a Baptist preacher.”¹⁰ The engrossing opening section of *Parting the Waters* immerses readers in the African American setting that shaped King’s religious worldview before the arrest of Rosa Parks suddenly made him a public figure. A brief history of Montgomery’s Dexter Avenue Baptist Church culminates in the tumultuous social gospel ministry of Vernon Johns, whose abrupt resignation prompted Dexter’s deacons to choose King as a less confrontational alternative. Branch’s sketch of King’s family background and religious education sets the stage for his sudden rise to prominence as the resourceful, well-connected, and superbly articulate leader of a 381-day bus boycott. Branch’s depiction of King’s formative years stands up well and is generally consistent with the portrait of King that emerges in the subsequently published volumes of *The Papers*, which include hundreds of King’s student papers and other early writings that became available to researchers after Branch’s first volume had been published.¹¹ King’s student papers must be used critically in any biographical treatment, especially given his tendency to appropriate

⁷ Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 771.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 770.

⁹ In contrast, David Garrow places greater reliance on documentary sources in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1987), resulting in a narrative that is less engaging but sometimes more factually reliable than Branch’s.

¹⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Un-Christian Christian: SCLC Looks Closely at Christianity in a Troubled Land,” *Ebony* 20 (August 1965): 76.

¹¹ *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 1: *Called to Service, January 1929–June 1951*, edited by Clayborne Carson, Ralph E. Luker, and Penny A. Russell (Berkeley, Calif., 1992); vol. 2: *Rediscovering Precious Values, July 1951–November 1955*, edited by Clayborne Carson, Ralph E. Luker, Penny A. Russell, and Peter Holloran (Berkeley, Calif., 1995); vol. 3: *Birth of a New Age, December 1955–December 1956*, edited by Clayborne Carson, Susan Carson, Adrienne Clay, Virginia Shadron, and Kieran Taylor (Berkeley, Calif., 1997); vol. 4: *Symbol of the Movement, January 1957–December 1958*, edited by Clayborne Carson, Tenisha Armstrong, Susan Carson, and Kieran Taylor (Berkeley, Calif., 2000); vol. 5: *Threshold of a New Decade, January 1959–December 1960*, edited by Clayborne Carson, Tenisha Armstrong, Susan Carson, and Kieran Taylor (Berkeley, Calif., 2005); vol. 6: *Advocate of the Social Gospel, September 1948–March 1963*, edited by Clayborne Carson, Susan Carson, Susan Englander, Troy Jackson, and Gerald L. Smith (Berkeley, Calif., 2007).

the words of others. That being said, some of his papers are remarkably revealing—candidly tracing the development of the religious ideas that guided his public ministry. Like other scholars, Branch drew insights from “Autobiography of Religious Development,” the handwritten paper that King prepared as a twenty-one-year-old second-year student at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania. This fourteen-page sketch previewed the basic themes of King’s public life, most notably his “anti-capitalist feelings,” spurred by the sight of “numerous people standing in bread lines”; his basic optimism about “human nature”; his rejection of religious fundamentalism as “contrary to the very nature of my being”; and his view of his own religious faith as the “largely unconscious” “gradual intaking of the noble ideals” of his family, rather than the product of a “crisis moment” of divine revelation.¹² King’s centrality in the southern mass protests of the 1950s and 1960s has often been overstated, but Branch demonstrates that King performed a crucial, inspirational role by linking the limited goals of black grassroots activists to transcendent, widely shared religious values.

Yet, while Branch provides a revealing portrait of King’s formative religious experiences and of his complex relationship with his domineering yet supportive father, the recent sixth volume of *The Papers* provides researchers with important additional documentation of King’s religious development. These materials—some of which were stored for decades after King’s death in the basement of his Atlanta home—add to the portrait that Branch and other scholars have painted of King as a proponent of the social gospel whose commitment to economic justice was informed but not diminished by his theological search for an understanding of the power, ubiquity, and resilience of evil.¹³ King has often been described as becoming increasingly radical during his final years; however, his extant writings from the pre-Montgomery period indicate that the Poor People’s Campaign marked a return to the social gospel convictions of his early ministry. One of his earliest seminary papers, written in 1948, when he was nineteen—seven years before the start of the Montgomery boycott—demonstrates that he was already committed to a ministry based on knowing “the problems of the people that I am pastoring.” He confidently defined his pastoral mission in a way that foreshadowed the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign: “I must be concerned about unemployment, slums [*sic*], and economic insecurity. I am a profound advocator of the social gospel.”¹⁴ King was undoubtedly concerned about civil rights reform, but his overriding interest in economic justice was already evident before the era of mass civil rights activism.¹⁵ Branch draws attention to King’s close relationship with Crozer professor George W. Davis, the steel union activist’s son

¹² King, “An Autobiography of Religious Development” [12 September–22 November 1950], *King Papers*, 1: 359–363.

¹³ In 1997, Coretta Scott King made available to the King Papers Project boxes of manuscripts that had been stored in the basement of the family home in Atlanta. This collection, which was later purchased by Atlanta’s Morehouse College, included many documents concerning King’s childhood and early adulthood. Some of the autobiographical materials were also included in my edition of *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 1998).

¹⁴ King, “Preaching Ministry” [14 September–24 November 1948], *King Papers*, 6: 69.

¹⁵ The early development of King’s social gospel ideas has been explored in recent studies by two of my former colleagues at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project; see Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia, 2006); and Troy Jackson, *Becoming King: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Making of a National Leader* (Lexington, Ky., 2008).

who was “the embodiment of Rauschenbush’s Social Gospel” and taught almost a third of King’s seminary courses.¹⁶ He also offers a brief but perceptive account of King’s ill-fated interracial romance—“King came hard to the judgment that the price of a mixed marriage was higher than he was willing to pay.”¹⁷ But he does not mention that King, along with a black Crozer classmate and their dates, had a potentially disastrous late-night encounter with an armed New Jersey tavern owner who refused to serve alcoholic beverages to the group.¹⁸ King’s newly available papers strengthen Branch’s portrayal of him as a skeptical preacher’s son who adjusted well to Crozer’s “world of religious, moral, and historical ideas he knew he loved in a way he could not yet define, with no prior obligation to buy any of it.”¹⁹ From the earliest stages of his seminary studies, King reconciled his strong religious faith with his critical assessment of biblical texts. While accepting the likelihood “that the whale did not swallow Jonah, that Jesus was not born [of] a virgin, or that Jesus never met John the Baptist,” he still sought scriptural guidance: “What moral implications do we find growing out of the Bible? What relevance does Jesus have in 1948 A.D.?”²⁰

It is possible that Branch and King himself placed too much emphasis on the academic aspects of King’s religious development, while understating his indebtedness to African American religious influences, but it is certainly the case that theological ideas indelibly shaped his intellectual worldview. *Parting the Waters* draws attention to the crucial importance of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in moving King from an uncritical acceptance of social gospel liberalism toward Niebuhr’s view of sin as a fundamental aspect of human nature. As he finished his seminary studies, King described himself as “leaning toward a mild neo-orthodox view of man” due to his experiences “with a vicious race problem.”²¹ Branch’s assessment of the impact of Niebuhr is both forthright—arguing that King changed “his fundamental outlook on religion”—and elusive: “Although the Niebuhr influence went to the heart of the public and private King and affected him more deeply than did any modern figure, including Gandhi, the connection between King and Niebuhr would be obscured by complicated twists of time, race, and popular imagery.”²² My own study of King’s Crozer papers suggests that while they are unquestionably a crucial source for biographical study, they are unlikely to offer definitive answers regarding the religious convictions that he brought into his public ministry. It may be the case that the most distinctive aspects of King’s intellect were his eclecticism and his lack of a coherent theology. Modern notions of historical exegesis did not completely assuage his teenage religious doubts, but he graduated from Crozer with intellectual tools that made possible his successful career as a politically engaged preacher. While distinguishing himself as a seminary student, King still questioned Baptist tenets and acknowledged that he had never experienced a crisis moment of surrender to faith. His decision to undertake studies in personalist theology with Boston University’s Edgar S.

¹⁶ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 74.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 73–90.

¹⁸ See “Statement on Behalf of Ernest Nichols, *State of New Jersey vs. Ernest Nichols*, by W. Thomas McGann,” 20 July 1950, *King Papers*, 1: 327–328.

¹⁹ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 73.

²⁰ King, “The Weaknesses of Liberal Theology I,” 1948, *King Papers*, 6: 80.

²¹ King, “How Modern Christians Should Think of Man” [29 November 1949–15 February 1950], *ibid.*, 1: 274.

²² Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 81.

Brightman grew out of his effort to reconcile his religious convictions with his doctrinal doubts:

How I long now for that religious experience which Dr. Brightman so cogently speaks of throughout his book. It seems to be an experience, the lack of which life becomes dull and meaningless. As I reflect on the matter, however, I do remember moments that I have been awe awakened; there have been times that I have been carried out of myself by something greater than myself and to that something I gave myself. Has this great something been God? Maybe after all I have been religious for a number of years, and am now only becoming aware of it.²³

King's doctoral studies at Boston University were notable less for his theological writings than for his increasing adeptness in appropriating theological ideas to provide intellectual gloss for his sermons. Indeed, his eagerness to mine theological texts for rhetorical nuggets limited his prospects as an academic theologian and may provide a partial explanation for his tendency to plagiarize the ideas of more creative theologians.²⁴ The most revealing expression of his broad vision of social justice can be found in his personal correspondence and early sermons. Because Branch was apparently unaware of King's personal correspondence with his future wife, Coretta Scott, and ignored her involvement in peace and Progressive Party activities, his account of their relationship understates its political aspects. Eager to find a spouse who shared his political views, King was willing to overlook Baptist doctrine to marry a non-Baptist. "You would not have to be immersed," he reassured his future wife. "There is no saving efficacy in water."²⁵ An early love letter he wrote to Scott that was published in the most recent volume of *The Papers* sheds light on his early attachment to radical political values. Rejecting Cold War anti-communism, the two students confided their leftist leanings to one another. "I imagine you already know that I am much more socialistic in my economic theory than capitalistic," King announced in a July 1952 letter prompted by Scott's gift to him of Edward Bellamy's socialist fantasy *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* (originally published in 1888). Asserting confidently that capitalism had "outlived its usefulness," having "brought about a system that takes necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes," he added that change "would be evolutionary rather than revolutionary. This, it seems to me, is the most sane and ethical way for social change to take place." Although the public expression of such thoughts would have severely damaged his subsequent career as a civil rights leader, King felt secure in expressing his dissent from Cold War orthodoxy, informing his future wife that both capitalism and communism were inconsistent with true Christian values. He faulted Bellamy for failing "to see that man is a sinner, and . . . he will still be a sinner until he submits his life

²³ King, "A Conception and Impression of Religion Drawn from Dr. Brightman's Book Entitled *A Philosophy of Religion*," *King Papers*, 1: 415–416.

²⁴ The significance of plagiarism in King's academic writings has been explored in numerous writings stimulated by the findings of the King Papers Project: Clayborne Carson, with Peter Holloran, Ralph E. Luker, and Penny Russell, "Martin Luther King, Jr., as Scholar: A Reexamination of His Theological Writings," *Journal of American History* 78, no. 1 (June 1991): 93–105; Carson and the staff of the King Papers Project, "The Student Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Summary Statement on Research," *ibid.*, 23–40; and Carson, "Editing Martin Luther King, Jr.: Political and Scholarly Issues," in George Bornstein and Ralph G. Williams, eds., *Palimpsest: Editorial Theory in the Humanities* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1993), 305–316.

²⁵ Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 1969), 73.

to the Grace of God. Ultimately our problem is [a] theological one.” Cautioning Scott against excessive optimism about the triumph of socialism, King observed, “It is probably true that capitalism is on its death bed, but social systems have a way of developing a long and powerful death bed breathing capacity. Remember it took feudalism more than 500 years to pass out from its death bed. Capitalism will be in America quite a few more years my dear.”²⁶

King was not quite so candid in his sermons as in his letters to Scott, but the sermons he delivered while assisting his father at Ebenezer during the summer of 1953 (soon after his marriage in June) addressed racial segregation and discrimination in the context of a wide-ranging critique of modernity and of the global struggle for peace with social justice. Several of these sermons criticized “false Gods”—science, nationalism, and materialism. Sharply criticizing American chauvinism and anticommunism, King offered blunt advice: “One cannot worship this false god of nationalism and the God of Christianity at the same time.”²⁷ In another sermon he prepared that summer, he insisted that international peace was the “cry that is ringing in the ears of the peoples of the world,” but such peace could be achieved only when Christians “place righteousness first. So long as we place our selfish economic gains first we will never have peace. So long as the nations of the world are contesting to see which can be the most [imperialistic] we will [never] have peace. Indeed the deep rumbling of discontent in our world today on the part of the masses is [actually] a revolt against imperialism, economic exploitation, and colonialism that has been perpetuated by western civilization for all these many years.”²⁸ King’s expansive Christian worldview was perhaps most evident in the sermon “Communism’s Challenge to Christianity,” which he delivered in August 1953, and again in various forms later in his life. While rejecting communism as secularistic and materialistic, King nonetheless insisted that it was “Christianity’s most formidable competitor and only serious rival.” Marxian thought, he argued, should challenge Christians to express their own “passionate concern for social justice. The Christian ought always to begin with a bias in favor of a movement which protests against the unfair treatment of the poor, for surely Christianity is itself such a protest.” Asking whether Karl Marx could rightly be blamed for calling religion an opiate of the masses, he averred, “When religion becomes [so] involved in a future good ‘over yonder’ that it forgets the present evils ‘over here’ it is a dry as dust religion and needs to be condemned.”²⁹

Less than a year after King delivered his sermon on communism, he accepted the call to become the pastor at Dexter and began pushing gently yet consistently against the complacency of a congregation that had resisted the activism of his predecessor. He used his acceptance address as an occasion to assert his spiritual authority and to suggest the immensity of the task ahead.³⁰ He cited the same social gospel credo (Luke 4:18–19) that his father had used in 1940 to describe the “true mission of the church”: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach de-

²⁶ *King Papers*, 6: 125.

²⁷ King, “The False God of Nationalism,” *ibid.*, 6: 132.

²⁸ King, “First Things First,” 2 August 1953, *ibid.*, 6: 144–145.

²⁹ King, “Communism’s Challenge to Christianity,” 9 August 1953, *ibid.*, 6: 148–149.

³⁰ Vernon Johns, King’s sometimes abrasive predecessor at Dexter, actually focused his ministry more than did King on the economic issues that were central to social gospel Christianity.

Again the people of Dexter Avenue
 Baptist Church have called me to serve
 as ~~pastor~~ pastor of your historic Church. I
 have gladly accepted the call. It is
 more than perfect gratitude that I feel
 my appreciation to you, for bestowing upon
 this great honor. I accept the trusteeship
 dreadfully aware of the tremendous responsibilities
 accompanying it. ~~Contrary~~ Contrary to some
 shallow thinking, the responsibilities of the
 pastorate, both stayer and beyond the
 imagination, they take the whole corner.
~~I am going with me pastorate~~
~~inability~~
 It is a significant fact that I come
~~to Dexter at a most crucial hour~~ to the pastorate
 of Dexter at a most crucial hour of
 four world's history; at a time when the
 flame of war might arise at any time
 to reduce the ship of our dark and
 dreary world; at a time when men know
 all the while that without the proper guidance
 the whole of civilization may be plunged
 across the abyss of destruction; at a time
 when men are experiencing ^{in disruption} and
 conflict, self-destructive and meaningless despair
 and anxiety. Today men who were but
 yesterday preaching the Church of Christ are
 now asking the Church the way to the
 paradise of peace and happiness. We must
 somehow find our generation an answer. Dexter,
 like all other churches, must somehow lead
 men and women of a decadent generation
 to the high mountains of peace and ~~salvation~~
 salvation. We must give men and women,
 who are all but on the brink of despair,
 a new bent on life. I pray God that
 I will be able to lead Dexter in this

FIGURE 1: King's notes for his acceptance address at Dexter [2 May 1954]. *King Papers*, 6: 164.

liverance to the captives, and the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty
 them that are bruised."³¹ Only twenty-five, he challenged his congregation—for the
 most part his seniors—to expand their vision:

³¹ *King Papers*, 1: 33–34.

It is a significant fact that I come to the pastorate of Dexter at the most crucial hour of our world's history; At a time when the flame of war might arise at any time to redden the skies of our dark and dreary world; at a time when men know all [too] well that without the proper guidance the whole of civilization can be plunged across the abyss of destruction . . . Dexter, like all other churches, must somehow lead men and women of a decadent generation to the high mountain of peace and salvation.³²

At this early stage, King's religious convictions and social values had become the unifying threads of his life. His familial relationships, deep roots in the black Baptist church, theological studies, and early experiences as a preacher help to explain how a young, oratorically gifted minister quickly became an internationally known civil rights leader. King's training and experiences as a Baptist minister informed his understanding of the far-reaching historical significance of the civil rights militancy sparked by the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Viewed from this biographical perspective, his speeches and writings reveal a thread of intellectual consistency linking his formative years to his subsequent public life. If King had been willing and able to write a revealing and comprehensive autobiography, his inner thoughts might have served as a counterbalance to the FBI surveillance tapes that Branch and other historians have used to penetrate his pacific public persona as he confronted urban racial violence and antiwar protests. Increasingly depicted from the perspective of his associates, political rivals, and FBI spies, Branch's King rarely finds moments for reflection during his last years. Instead, Branch's difficult-to-verify anecdotes suggest King's inner turmoil, as in his description of King's response to quarreling among his SCLC colleagues about plans for a Poor People's Campaign:

Late one night, King literally howled against the paralyzed debate. "I don't want to do this any more!" he shouted alone. "I want to go back to my little church!" He banged around and yelled, which summoned anxious friends outside his room until [Andrew] Young and [Ralph] Abernathy gently removed his whiskey and talked him to bed.³³

While such recollections are titillating, Branch is on stronger ground when he recounts those occasions when King openly voiced the inner turmoil of his final year. King's sermons, especially those at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, and his off-the-record talks to SCLC staff members provided opportunities for him to ponder the overall meaning of his life as a Christian minister who had been called unexpectedly to lead a historic freedom struggle. Branch mentions, for example, King's explicit call for "democratic socialism" and his reference to the "inseparable triplets" "of racial injustice, poverty, and war" at a November 1967 SCLC gathering at the

³² Ibid., 6: 166.

³³ Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 641. Branch provides no source; the proximate note lists a later FBI wiretap transcript of a conversation between King and Stanley Levison. Branch's discussion of the FBI's damaging 1964 "blackmail" tape of King at a licentious party in Washington's Willard Hotel is based on the recollections of FBI officials who heard King's "distinctive voice" saying "I'm fucking for God!" (*Pillar of Fire*, 207). Because this tape has often been referenced in writings about King, and because King associates who also heard these recordings after a compilation reel was sent to King have expressed different memories of it, biographical understanding would be greatly enhanced by the release of all FBI surveillance records and by a serious scholarly discussion, including female voices, of King's sex life. Frank discussion, rather than titillation, might generate interesting comparisons of King with Gandhi, who was more willing to talk about his sexual feelings and formative sexual experiences.

Penn Center in South Carolina. Also revealing was King's subsequent reference at an SCLC gathering in February 1968 to his enthusiasm for the social gospel during his early ministry: "I read *Das Kapital* and *The Communist Manifesto* years ago when I was a student in college." He again cited the same biblical passage his father had used almost four decades earlier. "I didn't get my inspiration from Karl Marx. I got it from a man named Jesus, a Galilean saint who said he was anointed to heal the broken-hearted. He was anointed to deal with the problems of the poor."³⁴ One of the more intriguing and stirring of King's sermons was "Unfulfilled Dreams," delivered two weeks after the SCLC talk. Speaking at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta before church members who had known him since childhood, King linked the eternal, universal struggle between good and evil to the internal "civil war" that was "at the heart of human nature" and that served as a barrier "whenever we set out to dream our dreams and to build our temples" of peace. "I don't know about you, but I can make a testimony," he continued. "You don't need to go out saying that Martin Luther King is a saint. Oh, no. I want you to know this morning that I'm a sinner like all of God's children. But I want to be a good man. And I want to hear a voice saying to me one day, 'I take you in and I bless you, because you tried. It is well that it was within thine heart.'"³⁵

Branch completes his epic word portrait with King's stunning oration at Mason Temple in Memphis on the eve of his assassination. Displaying his singular awareness of the historical and global context of the modern African American freedom struggle, King inspired thousands of striking sanitation workers by assuring them that of all the great periods in history, he would choose to live during the time of their travail, even though the world was "messed up" and the nation was "sick": "Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty and say, 'If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, I will be happy.'" He reaffirmed the prophetic global vision that had always guided his ministry:

The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee, the cry is always the same: "We want to be free." And another reason that I'm happy to live in this period is that we have been forced to a point where we are going to have to grapple with the problems that men have been trying to grapple with through history . . . It is no longer a choice between violence and non-violence in this world; it's nonviolence or nonexistence . . . And also in the human rights revolution, if something isn't done and done in a hurry, to bring the colored peoples of the world out of their long years of poverty, their long years of hurt and neglect, the whole world is doomed. Now I'm just happy that God has allowed me to live in this period, to see what is unfolding.³⁶

³⁴ Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 556; King, Address at SCLC's Ministers Leadership Training Program, Miami, February 23, 1968, quoted in *Autobiography*, ed. Carson, 351.

³⁵ King, "Unfulfilled Dreams," in Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran, eds., *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, 1998), 195, 198–199. In his perceptive introduction to this sermon, King associate and neighbor Vincent Harding comments: "Without necessarily knowing the details of his inner war, many of us had seen the evidence of that internal conflict in his face, heard it in his voice. We recognized it partly because it resembled so many of our own struggles. In that last year Martin looked more beleaguered, harassed, and desperate than I had ever seen him before, and it was clear that more than external enemies were at work" (189).

³⁶ King, "I've Been to the Mountain Top," address at the Bishop Charles J. Mason Temple, Memphis,

During the two decades since the publication of *Parting the Waters*, the ever-expanding library of King scholarship has grown in size and analytical sophistication. The King Papers Project—now part of the King Research and Education Institute at Stanford University—continues to expand the universe of King-related documents available to researchers. It is a measure of Branch's monumental achievement that he has produced what is still the most comprehensive account of King's life within the larger context of the African American freedom struggle. Without intending to write a definitive biography, Branch has written a history of the King years that will encourage future biographers to seek a still deeper understanding of King's evolving thoughts during his tumultuous times.

Tennessee, April 3, 1968, http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/speeches/1%27ve_been_to_the_mountaintop.pdf.

Clayborne Carson is Professor of History at Stanford University and founding director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford. He is also Martin Luther King Jr. Distinguished Professor at Morehouse College and director of that institution's King Papers Collection.