Introduction

The Cry for Justice

On Good Friday, April 12, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested, booked and jailed in Birmingham, Alabama. He had violated a court’s injunction against marches during the battle to desegregate that city, a notorious bastion of racist terror. King was convinced that if the movement could triumph there, the walls of Southern segregation would crumble. While behind bars, he wrote the “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” At the very beginning, King declared, “Just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled the carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town.”

King had carried that gospel to Birmingham in early 1963, smarting from a recent setback in Albany, Georgia and hungry for a civil rights victory. He had envisioned a massive campaign of nonviolent protest that would wield the leverage of an Easter-season boycott to integrate Birmingham’s downtown stores. But with the insurgency faltering in the first weeks of April, King needed a dramatic stroke. He decided to court arrest. The authorities obliged, and put him behind bars. While in jail, he read a statement in the local newspaper from eight local white clergymen, all self-described racial “moderates.” They had branded King and his colleagues outsiders and extremists, rejected the demonstrations as untimely, and chided the protesters for precipitating violence. The “Letter” began as King’s retort to the clergymen.

For King’s closest colleagues, the “Letter” provided nothing less than the moral and philosophical foundations of their movement. Over the next fifty years, the Letter’s stature spread beyond the events that spawned it. It has been hailed as one of our nation’s literary
treasures, compared to the Gettysburg Address and Emile Zola’s J’accuse, and parsed and pondered in countless college and high school classrooms. The “Letter” earned King a place alongside Gandhi and Thoreau as a champion of civil disobedience. Its influence rippled across the globe to insurgents in the streets of Soweto, Cairo, Prague, Tunisia, and Beijing. King’s words—the bristling at those who tell the oppressed to “wait for a more convenient season,” the steely conviction of the irrepressible force of freedom in the world—have resonated among freedom-fighters long after the “Letter” was written.

The Letter’s broad appeal pays homage to the universalist stance in King’s lofty opening: “I am here because injustice is here.” But King was also in Birmingham because “my people,” as he often referred to fellow blacks, were suffering. King’s Christian faith and his savior’s love for all God’s children suffuse the Letter, but it derives its bite from black pain and anger. Those twin imperatives match the larger duality of King’s life: exhorting blacks and persuading whites, action and argument. Even though the “Letter” is addressed to whites, there was always a two-way flow between the two realms of King’s life. The defiant purpose of the black uprising spilled into the Letter; the Letter’s arguments about iniquity and its remedy flowed back into mass meetings, freedom songs, and marches.

The Birmingham struggle gave rise to events that forever changed our nation. The images from those months in the spring and summer of 1963 are now an indelible part of our national history: the city’s black youth defying the fire hoses and dogs of policemen dispatched to maintain white supremacy; the movement leaders galvanizing the protest with soaring sermons and freedom songs like “Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me around”; President John Kennedy addressing the nation in June, finally defining civil rights as an urgent moral issue and national
priority; and blacks and whites gathering at the Lincoln Memorial in August for the March on Washington to hear King’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

The battle for civil rights was not finally won in the months King called ‘dubbed the long “summer of our discontent.” The Civil Rights Act, which banned discrimination in public accommodations, would not be passed until the following year. The gyre of black defiance continued to spread across America. Battles with names like St. Augustine and Selma—modern equivalents of Antietam, Gettysburg and Bull Run—lay ahead. In September, 1963, in an act of racist retaliation, the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham would take the lives of four little black girls. The white backlash was just gathering force in the North. Still, after Birmingham, the foundations of the nation’s old racial order cracked in some elemental way and set the groundwork for the new one we live in today. The “Letter from Birmingham Jail”, the vision of nonviolence it argued for, and the dispossessed of God it sanctified played a critical part in dismantling Jim Crow.

The “Letter” merits revisiting today for its historical import alone, but there are other reasons as well. The moral vision that informs it has never seemed more relevant. At a time when Americans often seem preoccupied with their cultural identity, partisan tribe or social network node, King’s reminder of the Old Testament prophets who took their message into the world beyond their home towns calls out to us with its claim on sympathies greater than clan, race, and nation. All of the Letter’s subthemes turn on a broader humanistic vision: the duty to cry out for justice for all God’s children, the sin of sitting on the sidelines in the face of suffering, the idea that law should protect the precious worth of every human being.
The “Letter” is compelling as well on literary grounds. Its swerves and swings are remarkable. One moment, it offers reflective argument, the next it crackles with prophetic anger. The poise and politesse of the author dissolve into hints of sarcastic disdain, passive aggression, even self-pity. King drops the names of revered philosophers but leavens his erudition with a voyage into the inner recesses of black vulnerability (“When your first name becomes ‘nigger,’ your middle name ‘boy’”) and a tour of white America (“I have looked at the South’s beautiful churches. . .[and] found myself asking. . . . Who is their God?”) There is also the staccato embrace of extremism, with a sequence of questions and answers that startle like a slap in the face (“Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel? ‘I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.’”).

These varied approaches hint at a third, and perhaps the most compelling, reason to revisit the Letter: it reveals much about its often elusive author. It is a supremely personal work from someone moved, and sometimes riven, by rival impulses: rebuke and forgiveness, love of his race and love of humanity. An expressive man, Martin Luther King often hid his passion behind a mask of dignity.

As we move through the Letter, we witness a striking transformation. For the first half, we are mainly in the presence of a patient and gracious man, who crafts little moments of brotherhood and tries to win over his critics through appeals to their reason, sympathy and conscience. But around the midpoint, there’s a distinct shift, really a second act. King drops the mask; he begins to speak more bluntly. Instead of explaining himself, he begins to chide and criticize. He shows himself to be not just a black man, but an angry black man. The diplomat gives way to the prophet.
What the prophet reveals upends not just our popular notions of King but of what he believed. King did not think that many whites had much empathy. He grasped the flawed nature of democracy in America. His indignation reached beyond vitriolic racists and even the eight clergymen who criticized the Birmingham insurgency. He took aim at the indifference of all manner of civic, business and political leaders, and the vast universe of people who imagined themselves decent Americans but never really dwelled on the shame of American racism. He was not naïve about the power of soaring moral rhetoric to change hearts. King did not rest his optimism on faith in the American dream or the ordained nature of freedom in America. Instead, he found solace in his deep love of black people and the exceptional spirit of the slave ancestors. In all these different ways, the “Letter” anticipates the radical King who in the later years leading up to his 1968 assassination thundered against poverty, racism, and war.

Ultimately, the “Letter” challenges us and what we believe about our own nation and its mythology of perfection and the halting, often grudging way we went about redressing that primal flaw of slavery and all the forms of racism that succeeded it.

In exploring the Letter, I rely heavily on recordings of King’s own voice, particularly his addresses at mass meetings at Birmingham’s black churches right before and after he went to jail, where he often revealed less varnished versions of his beliefs and feelings. The source material includes a trove of CDs made available only relatively recently at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. One of them contains a barely-known, post-jail speech in which King preached an extraordinary, essentially “black” version of the Letter, which qualified and retracted aspects of what he had said to the white clergy.
Such sources are critical for making sense of the Letter, even though it is a written work addressed to whites. In truth, it is better seen as a transcribed form of oral culture than a philosophical treatise or formal rhetoric. King’s brilliance was always as a master of the spoken word, which is why listening to him is so important. Moreover, the “Letter” was a mélange of riffs, samples, stories, gambits and allusions, many of which came from his addresses to black people. Without a deep knowledge of those addresses, it is easy to miss the import of a fleeting allusion to the slave ancestors here or a small clue there that indicates King is preaching under the guise of writing. Andrew Young, the former Ambassador to the United Nations, King’s close colleague in SCLC and a key figure in the Birmingham uprising, observes, “The only way Martin could have answered [the clergymen] was in writing. But if he had been given a chance to go preach [the Letter] to them, he probably would have done that . . . All of this was pent up in him. It was, as he would say, like Jeremiah with fire pent up in his bones and that’s the way this letter was. It just spewed forth.”

To understand the Letter, it is also necessary to see it in its context. Part One, The Prelude, consists of Chapter One, “The Prisoner,” which sets the scene by placing the “Letter” in its immediate historical context. My aim here is not to document every aspect of the Birmingham movement, a job that has been ably accomplished by others. It is to chart the events that landed King in lock-up and provoked his rising outrage and disappointment, and to introduce the distinctive brand of prophetic Christianity that animated him and his colleagues.

Part Two, “The Letter” (Chapters Two and Three), slows the pace of the story as we move with King into the “Letter” and follow him step by step through it. Chapter Two, “The Diplomat,” explores his careful and reasonable efforts in the first half of the “Letter” to convince whites of the legitimacy of direct action and black impatience. Chapter Three, “The Prophet,”
explores the critical shift that emerges in the second half of the “Letter” and the dramatic revelations that ensue when King drops the stance of dispassionate reason. As we will discover, King was “telling the man” in ways that shared much with Malcolm X’s excoriations of whites.

Part Three, “The Aftermath,” consists of Chapter Four, “The Street Fighter.” I track King as he leaves the jail and rejoins the insurgency as it applied the arguments of the Letter and eventually won the day; trace the impact of Birmingham on the Kennedy Administration and on King’s delivery of “I Have a Dream” at the March on Washington; and explore that bitter finale, the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. “What killed these girls?” an angry King will ask. In keeping with the heavy load of personal responsibility to act that is central to his gospel of freedom, he refuses to exempt either silent whites or disengaged blacks from culpability.

The Epilogue considers the later biography of the “Letter” as it moved out into the world. After lifting the veil of anonymity from the eight white clergymen and exploring their reactions to the Letter, I consider the ultimate testimony to its universality: how protest movements across the globe borrowed its arguments and applied it to their own liberation struggles.

As we look back at those volatile months in 1963 and consider the arc of history that leads from Birmingham to the election of the first black president and beyond, it is hard not to wonder what King would make of all the elegies to “postracial” America. As we will discover when we examine the Letter and “I Have a Dream” in the light of the Letter, King had a more ambivalent relation to the national story than his occasional invocation of the American Dream suggests—and than the picture of him presented in textbooks or on the national holiday in his name might suggest. On the night before his assassination in 1968, when he tried to reassure his listeners, and perhaps himself, “We as a people will get there,” he really meant “people” as the
black nation within a nation. He read American history as an outsider looking in, even as he claimed a right to belong and selectively used America’s civil religious imagery when it suited him. He also read our history as a realist who harbored no illusions about the repressive powers and the depth of racism he was up against. Nothing in the “Letter,” nothing in the bedlam of Birmingham or its bittersweet aftermath, suggests that King viewed America as a providential nation whose destiny was freedom. Rather, that exceptional nation first had to be created by the exceptionally brave and spiritual people of the civil rights movement.

That the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” was ultimately a black man’s cry for black freedom does not mean King’s gospel of freedom ever lost its empathy for all God’s children. At the March on Washington, King imagined a white interrogator asking blacks, “When will you be satisfied?” King’s answer applied universally: “not until justice rolls down like waters.” Clearly, the gospel of freedom is a demanding one. There is no room for smug self-congratulation. There are always pharaohs to be vanquished, victims strewn along some Jericho Road. The work of the evangelist for freedom’s gospel is never done.