THE THEOLOGICAL ETHICS OF CONTEMPORARY PROPHETIC ACTS

by

Randall K. Bush, B.Mus., M. Div.

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School, Marquette University,
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

May 2003

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Researching and composing a dissertation is a multi-year project. Reflecting on the people and events that have influenced my life since I began my doctoral studies is a humbling yet gratifying process.

I begin by acknowledging and giving thanks for the wonderful people of First Presbyterian Church. The staff listened collegially when I gave progress reports on my work. The congregation listened patiently whenever my research became fodder for the sermon mill. Their generous and supportive spirits greatly sustained me as I balanced parish ministry and academic study.

I am most appreciative of the teachers, students, and office staff at Marquette University. I am indebted to Dr. John Schmitt for his biblical insights and to Dr. William Schweiker from the University of Chicago for graciously sharing his time and thoughts with me. I offer grateful thanks to my entire dissertation committee, with heartfelt appreciation extended to my dissertation director, Dr. Christine Firer Hinze. She was ever enthusiastic about my topic, meticulous in her scholarly judgment, instructive about good writing style, good-natured about my lapses into "pulpit prose," and a steady voice of encouragement throughout the extended dissertation gestation period.

As the lead voices in my private cheering section, I offer thanks to my parents and siblings. Parental pride is always difficult to measure, and because it is so constant, it is possible to take it for granted. To Suzi and Richard Bush, I say "thank you" for your love, your care, your requests for progress reports, and your soul-strengthening expressions of pride when this goal was finally attained.

Lastly, I wish to thank my wife, Beth, and my two children, Ian and Charlotte. Although I had long desired to pursue a doctoral degree, the journey only began in earnest a month after my wedding day. Very quickly "my" scholarly pursuits became "ours." I am grateful for my family allowing this doctoral "guest" to take up residence in our too-small, toy-strewn house on Deane Boulevard. As much as I have truly enjoyed the research and scholarship involved in this work, I must admit that when I hold the completed dissertation in my hands, I see Ian's face wanting to sit on my lap and type his name on the computer, or Charli squeezing beside me in search of scratch paper and a spare pen, or Beth listening with patience late at night as I forced the ideas into some sense of order by putting them into spoken words first.

Prophetic acts need not always be grand moments in sacred history. Ian's vigorous riding of our hobby horse, Charli's creative singing of various versions of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," or Beth's wonderful performances on stage as well as being beside me each day and night have all been faith-enriching, life-giving acts of prophetic power for me. You are present on every page of this work and I dedicate it to you with all my love.

Randall K. Bush
Racine, WI
Easter 2003

CONTENTS

Chapter 1:
Understanding Prophetic Activity

I. Broaching the Question

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, William Blake presents a creative dialogue with the prophet Isaiah:

> The Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me, and I asked them how they dared so roundly to assert that God spake to them; and whether they did not think at the time that they would be misunderstood, & so be the cause of imposition. Isaiah answer'd: "I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the infinite in every thing, and as I was then perswaded, & remain confirm'd, that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not for consequences, but wrote."
>
> Then I asked: "Does a firm perswasion that a thing is so, make it so?"
>
> He replied: "All poets believe that it does, & in ages of imagination this firm perswasion removed mountains; but many are not capable of a firm perswasion of any thing."[1]

When biblical scholars, theologians, and ethicists have sought to describe the nature of prophetic calls and prophetic activity, much of their source material has been the biblical scriptures and historical documents from the early church. But an intriguing set of questions emerges when it is asked whether prophetic activity occurs in our

[1] William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, quoted in James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 199.

contemporary world. Are there persons today whose actions and proclamations can be considered analogous to that of the prophetic figures of the canonical scriptures?

From the perspective of biblical studies, one common reply to that question can be summarized as follows: Although many figures throughout the scriptures are associated with prophetic activity, the rise and decline of prophecy itself roughly coincides with the rise and decline of the Israelite monarchy.[2] Many scholars would close the period of prophetic activity around the sixth century BCE, thereby ruling out the possibility of such figures appearing in our modern times.[3] Yet from the point of view of theological ethics, something more than the 'common reply' needs to be voiced on this subject.

In this dissertation, the question of whether contemporary prophetic acts are possible will be explored by using the following process. First, the category of prophetism will be surveyed from the perspective of biblical and sociological scholarship. This overview will focus on describing the nature of the prophetic role and the variables involved in ascribing prophetic authority. Second, paradigmatic prophetic acts will be highlighted, primarily gleaned from acts attributed to the prophet Jeremiah. By understanding the rhetorical quality of these prophetic examples, we will be able to

---

[2] "When Israelites lost control of political power, classical prophecy ended." (Martin J. Buss, "Prophecy in Ancient Israel," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supplement* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962], 696.) See also " . . . classical Israelite prophecy seems to have existed only during and immediately after the period of the Israelite monarchy." (Thomas W. Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989], 150.)

[3] Bernhard Anderson closes out his list of the classical age of Israelite prophecy with references to Haggai, Zechariah, Joel, and Malachi being active during the years c. 520-350 CE. (Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament,* 4th ed. [Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1986], 287.) See also Levi Olan, *Prophetic Faith and the Secular Age* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1982), 53 and David L. Petersen, *Late Israelite Prophecy: Studies in Deutero-Prophetic Literature and in Chronicles* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), 45.

propose a working definition of authentic prophetic acts that can then be applied to contemporary examples.

Third, the work of theologian Paul Tillich will be considered in relation to his theology of culture and his understanding of how prophetism involves moments of *kairos*. Fourth, theological ethicist William Schweiker's work on moral and hermeneutical realism will be surveyed in order to glean helpful categories when considering the ethics of contemporary prophetic activity. Fifth, two examples of possible contemporary prophetic acts will be proposed, specifically the 1955 refusal of Rosa Parks to surrender her seat while on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama, and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1963 writing of "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Through this process of discerning the theological ethics associated with prophetism, a response will be formulated to the question about the criteria for, and viability of, authentic prophetic activity in the modern/ postmodern context.

II. The Vocabulary of Prophetism

In formulating an adequate response to the question at hand, one starting point is to establish working definitions of both prophetic figures and prophetic activity. The source material for such definitions begins with the canonical witness, in particular the use of the term 'prophet' in the Hebrew scriptures and the canonical writings associated with figures specifically identified as prophets. Some have argued that descriptions of prophets and the inclusion of writings associated with these figures do not definitively prove that such persons actually existed or that their self-understanding directly coincided

with the later canonical category of 'prophet.'[4] It is true that there is an array of scripture purporting to be about prophets, however it is an array that neither speaks with one voice nor uses uniform terminology.[5] While absolute certainty may prove elusive regarding the scriptural referents to prophets, it is important within the context of this dissertation to recognize that the way in which the term 'prophet' has been used can assist in attempting to draw analogies about how such language might still be used today.[6]

Within the canon of the Hebrew scriptures, prophetic figures can be grouped into four broad categories: pre-monarchic, early monarchic, classic monarchic, and post-exilic prophets. First, there are five pre-monarchic figures identified as prophets. They include Abraham, Aaron, Miriam, Moses, and Deborah.[7] Moses is given the highest credentials by the Deuteronomic author, who says in the closing paragraph of that biblical book, "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (Deut 34:10).[8] Second, there are six early monarchic prophets, all of whom were active from the eleventh to ninth centuries BCE. This group includes Samuel, Nathan, Ahijah, Elijah, Micaiah, and Elisha.[9] Third, the largest category of prophets includes the figures associated with the period of classical prophetic activity, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah,

---

[4] Citing references to scholars like Robert Carroll and A. Graeme Auld who support this view, see Thomas W. Overholt "Prophecy in History: The Social Reality of Intermediation," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 48 (Oct 1990), 6. For other comments on this topic, see Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 11 and Kelvin G. Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts: Rhetorical Nonverbal Communication* JSOT Supplement Series 283 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 20-34.

[5] See work done on terms ("role labels") used for prophets in David L. Petersen, *The Roles of Israel's Prophets* JSOT Supplement Series 17 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1981), 35-70. Also see Overholt, JSOT 48 (1990): 4, 9-12.

[6] W. Sibley Towner, "On Calling People 'Prophets' in 1970" *Interpretation* 24 (Oct 1970), 495.

[7] For biblical references to pre-monarchic prophets, see Gen 20:7, Ex 7:1, Ex 15:20, Judg 4:4, and Deut 18:18. (B. D. Napier, "Prophets, Prophetism" *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962], 905.)

[8] All scriptural citations are from the NRSV, unless otherwise noted.

[9] 1 Sam 3:20, 1 Chron 29:29, 1 Kgs 11:29, 1 Kgs 18:36, 1 Kgs 22:6-9, 2 Kgs 6:12.

Ezekiel, Amos, Hosea, Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, and Habakkuk. Each of these has a collection of prophetic writings attributed to them and included in the canon. However, a significant decline occurs in recorded prophetic activity during the post-exilic period beginning in the late sixth-century BCE. The fourth category includes biblical figures associated with the period following the 538 BCE decree of Cyrus II, such as Second Isaiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Third Isaiah, Joel, and Malachi.[10] Also included in this group are the apocalyptic, post-exilic writings associated with Daniel.

Although all these figures are identified as prophets, the Hebrew vocabulary varies when making this designation. There are four words or phrases used in the Hebrew scriptures as titles for prophetic figures, yet three members of this linguistic group appear relatively infrequently. The first word is *ro'eh* and it appears in 1 Samuel 9, 1 and 2 Chronicles, and Isaiah 30. The term comes from the root "to see" and is commonly translated as 'seer.' It was used in reference to urban figures identified as prophetic resources for a particular community.[11] But based on a comment found in 1 Samuel 9:9, calling prophets 'seers' was an archaism, which the editor seems to have retained for historical reasons.[12] The second term for prophet is the phrase *'iš (ha)'elohim*, translated as 'man of God.' This occurs much more frequently than *ro'eh*, and is used primarily as an appellative. Examples include 'Moses the man of God' (Deut 33:1; Josh 14:6; Ps 90:1), 'David the man of God' (2 Chron 8:14; Neh 12:24, 36), and 'Shemaiah the man of God' (2 Chron 11:2). It is also used in reference to the figures Samuel, Igdaliah, and a

---

[10] Although dating of prophets is imprecise, this chronological listing is largely dependent on the work of Bernard Anderson. See Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 287.

[11] "The term ro'eh was used to describe a resident, urban figure who functioned in the public sacrificial cultus and who could act as a consultant on a fee basis." (Petersen, *Roles of Israel's Prophets*, 98.)

[12] "Formerly in Israel, anyone who went to inquire of God would say, 'Come, let us go to the seer'; for the one who is now called a prophet was formerly called a seer." (1 Sam 9:9)

few unnamed 'men of God,' but the phrase's strongest connection is to the stories associated with Elijah and Elisha.[13] Since it is not used in relation to the later prophetic figures, it appears to be a phrase restricted to earlier descriptions of prophets as itinerant holy men.[14]

The Hebrew words associated with a classic understanding of prophetism are *hozeh* and *nabî'*. The former term is found a total of nineteen times in Chronicles, 2 Samuel, 2 Kings, and the prophetic books of Amos, Micah, and Isaiah, while the latter term appears over 400 times throughout the historical and prophetic Hebrew scriptures. David Petersen argues that the words are not synonymous in terms of traditional referents, suggesting that *hozeh* is appropriate for Judahite figures and *nabî'* is used for Israelite figures; however, Petersen does suggest that the two titles are synonyms for the same role as "morality prophets."[15] Further etymological study into the nuances between the prior four terms does not significantly advance the thesis at hand, because there is simply "no scholarly consensus on the questions of the nature and social functions of Israelite prophecy."[16] What does clearly exist in the Hebrew scriptural witness is one dominant term (*nabî'*) used throughout the primary source material (Deuteronomic and

---

[13] Jer 35:4; 1 Kgs 17:17-24; 2 Kgs 1:9-13; 2 Kgs 4:1-13:19. Cf. Petersen, *Roles of Israel's Prophets*, 40-50.
[14] "The title 'iš (ha)'elohim' was used to depict an itinerant holy man who was related to urban support groups; . . . they were peripheral, though not external to, the more central roles and structures in the society." (Petersen, *Roles of Israel's Prophets*, 98.)
[15] Petersen defines 'morality prophets' as persons integrally related to the central institutions of their society, and who regularly legitimate or sanction standards of public morality. Ibid., 63-71, 99.
[16] Robert R. Wilson, "Early Israelite Prophecy," *Interpretation* 32 (Jan 1978): 3. See Napier: "One term is normative in the OT, and only one; . . . all arguments of meaning etymologically derived are inconclusive." (B. D. Napier, *IDB*, 896.) See also Von Rad: "We must not therefore look for any consistency or system in the way in which the terms are used in the Old Testament as it now exists." (Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology,* vol. 2 [Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965], 7.)

prophetic writings), which can be appropriately chosen as the basis for further elaboration on the roles associated with prophetic activity.[17]

Although the root meaning of the word *nabî'* cannot be precisely determined, good hypotheses link it to Akkadian and Arabic words meaning "to call" or "to announce."[18] Those verbs, however, can be interpreted in either a passive or an active sense.[19] The prophet can be seen as one called, placing the emphasis on the divine sending forth of the *nabî'*, or the prophet can be seen as the one who announces on behalf of the deity, placing the emphasis on the prophetic role as proclaimer and "forth-teller" of the divine word. While both interpretations can be substantiated with biblical examples, the case will be made that the latter, more active meaning fits better with the classic understanding of prophets as well as with the subsequent usage of the Hellenistic New Testament Greek translation (*prophetes*), which means 'one who speaks for another.'[20]

In determining whether the role of the *nabî'* is to be considered an active or a passive role, it is helpful to note that the two English nouns most commonly associated with biblical prophets are 'messenger' and 'intermediary.' J. Lindblom has called true prophets "mouthpieces of Yahweh," visionaries who serve as channels for streams of divine revelation.[21] R. R. Wilson calls them "intermediaries between the human and

---

[17] As an indirect verification of *nabî'* as the principal term related to prophets, a late 19th-century school of French painters considered themselves to be "vanguard figures" and adopted the collective label "The Nabis." Members of this group included Pierre Bonnard, Édouard Vuillard, Maurice Denis, and Ker Xavier Roussel. See Holland Cotter "Proustian Idylls of the Good Life," *New York Times*, 6 July 2001, B27.

[18] Napier, *IDB*, 897.

[19] Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 248.

[20] Lindblom, however, prefers the passive meaning "one called, one who has a vocation." (J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962], 102.) Yet Frank Cross has said " . . . modern expositors of the OT tend to stress that the prophets were originally and primarily 'forth-tellers' of God's will to their contemporaries rather than 'foretellers' of the future." (F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2d ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983], 1133.)

[21] Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 114.

divine worlds."[22] J. Blenkinsopp refers to the social category of 'royal messenger' to suggest that prophets understood their role as being called upon to relay messages or commands verbatim, although at times they might add their own words of commination or explication.[23] C. Westermann also considers prophetic speech as a "messenger's speech," an indirect revelation of God that follows different forms depending on whether it is a message of exhortation or judgment.[24] B. Long builds upon this definition by describing a prophet as "a religious specialist who works in contact with the divine reality, and who brings forth for [the] public direct or indirect messages through which others gain access to, and benefits from, the supranatural world."[25] Lastly, A. Heschel pushes the 'messenger' idea toward the opposite extreme from Lindblom, arguing that a "prophet is a person, not a microphone" whose task it is to convey a divine view while being a point of view. He insists that prophets not only convey; they reveal. Heschel argues that prophets speak from the perspective of God, but always as it is perceived from the perspective of their own situation.[26]

Despite this range of scholarly positions, the majority acknowledge that prophetic intermediaries are active participants when communicating divine messages, both in terms of how they present what has been revealed and how they offer additional words for clarification and elaboration. Further evidence of this can be seen by examining the prophetic use of "messenger formulas." This is a stylistic pattern found in many accounts of prophetic oracles. It occurs when the primary message delivered by the *nabî'* is set

---

[22] Wilson, "Early Israelite Prophecy," 3.
[23] J. Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel,* 2d ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983), 29-30.
[24] C. Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 98-100.
[25] Burke O. Long, "Social Dimensions of Prophetic Conflict," *Semeia* 21 (1981): 34.
[26] Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Peabody: Prince Press, 1962), viii, 22.

apart by the phrase "Thus says Yahweh."[27] Lindblom divides these messenger formulas into several categories, including royal proclamations ("thus says Yahweh"), rhetorical formulas ("hear the word of Yahweh"), revelation formulas ("thus has Yahweh said to me"), and others.[28] Yet the work of two scholars on this topic merits special attention.

First, Claus Westermann has broken down the pattern of prophetic speech into three constitutive parts: the commissioning, the transmission, and the delivery.[29] In this tripartite structure, a distinction is made between the initial conversation (between the one sending and the one sent) and the subsequent conversation (between the one sent and the message recipient). Within this process, the 'messenger formula' usually appears twice – once in the initial verbalization of the message and later in the subsequent repetition of the message to its intended audience.[30] Yet, aside from the nuances of his argument, what is important to note is how Westermann honestly acknowledges that prophetic speech is "a personal event to which speaking as well as hearing belongs; a kind of happening that moves from one person (the one speaking) to another (the one hearing)."[31]

Westermann's insight is significant because some descriptions of prophetic speech have presented this genre as only involving two actors, for example, the Lord and the Lord's appointed messenger. According to this particular view, the messenger's task

---

[27] The use of this formula often occurs in some form at the beginning or at the conclusion of a biblical prophetic oracle. Cf. Isa 45:11-13; Jer 2:1-3; Ezek 28:1-10; Amos 1:3-5; Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 248.

[28] Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 152.

[29] Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech,* 101.

[30] Westermann substantiates his model by utilizing examples from the patriarchal biblical history, the prophetic biblical corpus, and the Mari community texts that deal with cultic prophecy. E.g., Gen 32:3-5; Isa 37:21-35; the speech of Dagan to Malik-Dagan to be passed on to King Zimrilim. (Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech,* 101, 120, 137.)

[31] Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, 93.

is clearly a passive one, namely, to open his or her own souls for divine revelations and receive messages from the invisible world, which would later be imparted verbatim to others.[32] According to this description, the prophet is a mere microphone amplifying divine words of salvation or judgment; the way the prophet shapes the message in order to facilitate its being heard by the intended audience is not a significant factor in this model. But through Westermann's analysis, the presence of two distinctive conversations within most prophetic speeches is more fully acknowledged. Now it is possible for a third actor to be given equal billing with the other two participants, for along with the one commissioning and the one commissioned, there is the one for whom the entire prophetic process is set in motion. This is the intended audience, which might be an individual or a nation. Based on Westermann's insight, it becomes imperative that the question "who is being addressed?" be included in any analysis of prophetic speech.[33]

Second, while recognizing how prophets are messengers for God, Gerhard von Rad has described important distinctions in regard to the precise form of the prophet's message. To begin with, von Rad distinguishes between divine words repeated by a prophet and the prophet's own words spoken either as a preface or some other form of verbal elaboration.[34] The prophet's words often precede the messenger formula and are designed to focus the audience's attention on what is about to be said. In such situations, diatribes and words of denunciation might precede divine threats, while speeches of exhortation and hope might precede divine promises.[35] In fact, neither Westermann nor

---

[32] Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 48.
[33] "Three questions arise from the character of this word: *Who speaks? To whom does he speak? What takes place in this speaking?*" (Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, 93.)
[34] Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:37.
[35] For examples of prophetic diatribe, see Amos 3, 4, 5; for an example of prophetic exhortation, see Isa 42. Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 19.

von Rad restricts prophetic speech to forms that specifically utilize a messenger formula. Von Rad, for example, lists a variety of possible prophetic speech genres, such as priestly directions, legal pronouncements, cultic hymns, wisdom sayings, and dirges. His conclusion is that no form, whether secular or sacred, "was safe from appropriation as a vessel for the discharge of his task by one prophet or another."[36]

This quote is much more than a passing remark made in reference to form critical studies of the prophetic corpus. Consider what von Rad writes next:

> The form in which a particular message is cast is also important in a still stricter sense of the word 'form', for a 'form' is never just something external, concerned with literary style alone; in the last resort, form cannot be separated from content. What determined the choice of the form was primarily the subject-matter of the message. But the content of the prophetic preaching could not possibly be housed in any traditional forms – not even a specifically prophetic one – for it completely transcended the whole of Israel's previous knowledge of Yahweh. The very nature of the subject-matter itself demanded nothing short of a bold method of expression – it was always, so to speak, an *ad hoc* improvisation – simply because the prophet's message thrust out at every side beyond each and all of Israel's sacral institutions, the cult, law, and the monarchy. In the same way, the very nature of prophecy also demanded the right to make use of what were entirely secular forms with exactly the same freedom as with religious ones, as if there were no difference at all between them, for ultimately prophecy moved in a direction which transcended the old distinctions: when it prophesied judgment, it also announced the end of the established sacral order, and when it foretold salvation, it spoke increasingly of a state of affairs in which all life would be ordered, determined, and sustained by Yahweh, and this would, of course, result in the removal of the old distinction between sacral and secular.[37]

Von Rad is suggesting that the two sets of contrasting categories (form/content and sacred/secular) lose much of their internal distinctiveness when applied to prophetic speech. The message of the prophet is intrinsically bound up with both the formal structure of the message and the *ipsissima verba* spoken. And, in the process of

---

[36] Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:38.
[37] Ibid., 39.

communicating this divine-sent message, the categories delineating the sacred from the profane are blurred and transcended.

One of the best biblical examples of this is found in the story of Nathan and David (2 Samuel 12). Nathan is sent by God to confront David with words of judgment concerning his recent actions toward Bathsheba and Uriah. Given the power imbalance between this *nabî'* and the Israelite king, he could not have easily walked into David's presence with words of accusation and condemnation. The content of his message was judgmental, yet given the covenant relationship between David and Yahweh, the larger goal is for David to receive the words of judgment while acknowledging his own sinful actions (2 Sam 12:13). Thus the content of Nathan's message is interwoven into the overall form of prophetic discourse, in that the teaching story prompts David to pronounce judgment upon himself even before Nathan delivers Yahweh's message of rebuke. Similarly, Nathan uses the non-sacred medium of legal pronouncements to present a case to David in which property rights were abused and then converts what he says into a sacred medium of prophetic discourse by substituting in the characters of David, Uriah, and Bathsheba. Just as von Rad has pointed out, Nathan improvised a way to present a prophetic word to King David in which form and content are merged and any strict distinction between sacred and secular falls by the wayside.

III. The Active Prophetic Role

In reviewing the scholarly material on this subject so far, an interpretative continuum has emerged, ranging from seeing the *nabî'* passively as a mouthpiece solely giving voice to the precise *debar YHWH* to viewing the *nabî'* actively as a messenger

proclaiming, yet also shaping, the word of the Lord. While the use of a messenger formula would seem to position a *nabî'* nearer the former end of this continuum, Westermann has shown that this process cannot be entirely passive because the prophetic discourse involves two conversations with different conversation partners. Von Rad's analysis goes a step further and points out how additional material is added to the *debar YHWH* in order to communicate fully the message of judgment or salvation. In the process of presenting the prophetic words so that they may be effectively heard, the *nabî'* often blurs the line between form and content. The prophet's task becomes one of "clothing" the Lord's message, doing what is necessary to attract attention and to speak forth on behalf of God in a way that is rhetorically successful.[38] Thus, the more recent, and arguably more accurate, portrayal of prophets considers them to be active, rather than passive, messengers of the Lord.

When considering prophets in this light, two of the factors influencing the way in which they clothe the Lord's message merit further comment. First, prophetic speech is commonly the response to problematic situations at hand. This insight is diminished when too much attention is placed on prophecy as a future-oriented form of speech. For example, the first definition often offered for prophecy in dictionaries is that it is a prediction. Hermann Gunkel reinforces this position when he declares that "the oldest prophetic style [is] found in the passages that depict the future."[39] Yet Westermann argues that this emphasis on future predictions sidetracks research away from other significant forms of prophetic speech, and scholars like Mowvley and Lindblom begin their texts by stating that it is a "serious limitation" to imagine that prophets were only

---

[38] Ibid., 38.
[39] Quoted in Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, 26.

concerned about future events.[40] In fact, future predictions often arose from prophets through their observation of the present. They would point out the "directional structure" of history, warning of the future consequences that would surely follow from present actions displeasing to the Lord. Rather than 'fore-telling,' prophets specialized in 'forth-telling,' declaring the word of God to the here and now.[41]

Speaking forth was a necessary part of how the prophets fulfilled their office as assayers among the Lord's people.[42] This may have involved passing judgment upon people and circumstances, or it may have meant offering a word of consolation and defense.[43] It may also have taken the form of expressing a lament on behalf of a troubled nation.[44] What is common to all these roles was an awareness of the contemporary setting that prompted a prophetic word as an exhortative, faithful response. Abraham Heschel has said that prophets focus their eyes on the society-at-large and the present conduct they witness around them, exhibiting their true greatness by their ability to hold God and humankind in a single thought.[45]

If the prophetic word is to address the crisis situation at hand, the dynamics of the problem being confronted will affect the vocabulary and style that the prophet uses to present the message. This is seen in Elijah's reassuring promise of divine provision that he offers to the widow of Zarephath during a time of famine (1 Kgs 17:14), in the opening verses of Deutero-Isaiah offering comfort to the exile community (Isa 40:1-2), in

---

[40] Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, 26, 27; Harry Mowvley, *Reading the Old Testament Prophets Today* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 3; Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 1.
[41] Buss, *IDB Supplement*, 694; Heschel, *The Prophets*, 12.
[42] "I have made you an assayer and tester among my people, that you may know and assay their ways." (Jer 6:27 RSV)
[43] Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:74; Heschel, *The Prophets*, 24.
[44] Buss, *IDB Supplement*, 694.
[45] Heschel, *The Prophets*, 21.

the invective language used by the prophet Hosea against the unfaithful Israelite nation (Hos 4:13-16), and in many other places. Yet as much as the prophetic words are shaped by the context in which they are spoken, they are also shaped by the community from which they arise. This second factor involves the prophet's audience; in particular, it involves the cultic and worshiping community to which the prophet belongs.

J. Lindblom offers four, not mutually exclusive, categories of prophets: cenobitic prophets, court prophets, sanctuary prophets, and free prophets.[46] The first three categories identify prophets by the groups and settings with which they are associated. The fourth category of "free" prophets simply designates those figures who live a life in their own homes and amidst their own families. In general, the lines between all these categories were blurred when prophets assumed roles similar to priests or when they visited sanctuaries for official ceremonies.[47] Yet the indistinctiveness of these categories is not a liability. The scholarly consensus recognizes that in ancient Israel, there existed an intimate relationship between the prophetic figures and the cultic, community-at-large.[48] Whether they resided in a cenobitic group, on sanctuary property, or in a private home, they each existed as part of a larger community and some participated in cultic ceremonies.

---

[46] Lindblom actually offers five categories. The one that has been omitted is his final category of "prophets of a mixed type." It has been omitted because almost all prophetic figures could be included in this last group, due to the varied way the majority of them shared their prophetic words. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 83.

[47] Samuel is a good example of this, such as in 1 Samuel 3 when he is described as both priest and prophet, or in 1 Samuel 16 when he moved from his home in Ramah to visit Bethlehem, where he publicly sacrificed a heifer to the Lord while later surreptitiously anointing David as king. Cf. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 82.

[48] Napier, *IDB*, 900. One author who is commonly cited in reference to this view is Sigmund Mowinckel – in particular, his 1923 work *Psalmenstudien: Kultusprophetie und prophetische Psalmen*. Mowinckel argues that the psalm texts that pertain to the protection of the king and the city of Jerusalem could be seen as being composed by prophets serving in some official cultic capacity, such as Psalms 46, 50, 60, 68, 82, 84, 87, 110, 132. Mowinckel also makes a case for a cultic setting for the prophet Nahum. See Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 259, 276-277.

How is the nature of this communal and cultic identity to be understood? First, it was part of the larger self-identification of the Israelite community, for "Israel could be Israel only cultically."[49] The exodus event was commemorated cultically through the Passover, while the providential care of the Creator God was remembered cultically through the festivals of Weeks and Booths (Exod 23:14-17). The covenantal relationship between God and God's people was honored through the sacrificial offerings, tithes, and first fruits (Exod 24:3-8). Even the Sabbath rest cultically expressed the divine ordering of God from the beginning of all creation (Exod 20:8-11).

Second, the prophets' work always presupposed "the decisive impingement of Yahweh upon history."[50] This interrelationship may be experienced individually, but its frame of reference was always communal, if not cosmic. The covenant with Abraham gave early voice to this sentiment through the promise that "all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him" (Gen 18:18b). The writings attributed to the prophet Isaiah tell how God "shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many people" (Isa 2:4a) and that the Lord's covenantal relationship with the tribes of Jacob was intended to serve as "a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isa 49:6b). The prophet Jeremiah was appointed to be a prophet to the nations, and Jerusalem would be the place where all nations would gather (Jer 1:5, 3:17); the latter idea was reiterated by numerous other prophets, including Zephaniah (Zeph 3:8) and Zechariah (Zech 8:22-23). The biblical prophet, however isolated or "free" as a person, was invariably an intermediary for God, whose realm of activity is universal and whose focus of redeeming

---

[49] Napier, *IDB*, 902.
[50] Ibid., 905. See also, "The divine life confronts, is involved in, decisively qualifies, the life of history." (Ibid., 910.)

loving-kindness is consistently communal. Those dynamics shaped and affected the overall message of the prophets.

Third, while the prophets' voices were most often raised to bring words of exhortation or judgment, another primary function of the *nabî'* was intercession. Von Rad notes how such acts of intercession frequently occurred in times of national emergency, while waging war, or as part of official acts of worship.[51] Early biblical examples of this type of intercessory behavior include Abraham praying for Sodom (Gen 18:22-33), Moses praying for Aaron (Deut 9:20), and Samuel interceding on behalf of the Israelite people (1 Sam 12:19, 23). Sometimes the Hebrew scriptures describe situations when prophets were specifically instructed not to employ their gifts of intercession, as was the case when Jeremiah was forbidden to pray for Judah (Jer 7:16). What can be inferred from these diverse examples is that to perform such intercessory tasks meant that the prophets were recognized as spokespersons for the larger community. The conversations did not proceed solely from God through the *nabî'* on to the designated audience; sometimes the conversation also flowed in the opposite direction. This insight is a critical one in any definitional understanding of prophetic figures and prophetic activity.

At the outset of this chapter, it was noted that a working definition of prophets is necessary before any conclusion about the ethics of contemporary prophetic activity can be drawn. A succinct recapitulation of the arguments presented so far shows that an initial definition has now been broadly sketched. Relying on biblical sources, one dominant Hebrew term (*nabî'*) was identified as the primary referent for figures that fulfilled the social role of prophet. Etymological study reveals the possibility of both a

---

[51] Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:51-52.

passive and active meaning for this term. But the latter alternative is to be preferred for several reasons, including the fact that the *nebi'im* are involved in at least two different conversations (with God and with the designated audience) and that the process of serving as an intermediary between God and a particular group of people means that the prophet takes an active role in shaping the divine message according to the situational context to which (and communal context in which) the message is to be relayed. Further evidence that the role of *nabî'* is not a passive one is patent whenever the prophet fulfills the role of intercessor, actively facilitating an ongoing conversation that may originate from God and move toward humanity, or originate with humanity and address God, or some combination of these options. Therefore, a biblical understanding of prophetic figures premises that they are active intermediaries facilitating communication between the realms of the human and the divine, and significantly shaping the message itself based on the context in which the communication occurs.

IV. The Prophetic Process

This understanding is supported by the work of Thomas Overholt and his analytical model describing the nature of prophetic activity. Overholt sees a close affinity between anthropology and scriptural studies, primarily because the former involves "the study of human beings in the context of the groups in which they live and interact."[52] It is his contention that exegesis of biblical material is always aided by such a contextual approach. Overholt's particular interest lies in the area of cross-cultural comparisons of prophetic activity. He argues that too often only the content of the prophets' message has

[52] Thomas Overholt, *Cultural Anthropology and the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 1.

been analyzed, thereby making comparisons between representative prophetic figures from various cultural settings quite difficult. Only when one goes deeper and explores "beneath the level of content" is it possible for significant similarities to begin to emerge between these sundry prophetic figures.[53] Overholt is quick to acknowledge that no definitive interpretation of prophetic activity can be proposed against which all claims can be objectively measured; however, outlining a general model of the prophetic process allows one to operate at "a level of abstraction sufficient [for] similarities to surface for comparison."[54]

Overholt's model has been characterized as involving three actors (god/prophet/people) who interrelate in four modes (revelation/proclamation/feedback/expectation of confirmation).[55] Overholt goes beyond what Westermann articulated about prophetic speech by emphasizing the interrelationship between the prophetic conversation partners. Overholt starts with an encounter between a supernatural source and a prophetic intermediary figure. In this initial encounter, often occurring in a private setting, the prophet receives a revelatory message from the deity. Second, the prophetic intermediary proclaims the revelatory message to the designated audience. This proclamation may include both verbal and nonverbal material, and it is generally focused on a particular crisis of the present moment. Third, the prophet receives feedback from the recipient audience, which may be positive, negative, or indifferent. Fourth, there is commonly an occasion for the prophet to offer feedback to the divine source of revelation. This may

---

[53] Thomas Overholt, "Prophecy: The Problem of Cross-Cultural Comparison," *Semeia* 21 (1981): 73.
[54] Thomas Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 182, 22; B.J. Malina, "The Social Sciences and Biblical Interpretation," *Interpretation* 36 (1982): 241.
[55] This summary of Overholt's position comes from a published response to one of Overholt's article; see Norman K. Gottwald, "Problems and Promises in the Comparative Analysis of Religious Phenomena," *Semeia* 21 (1981): 104.

take the form of immediate intercession, such as words offered on behalf of the people, or it may be feedback given at a later date when there is subsequent communication between the prophet and the divine source of revelation. Fifth, there are often additional proclamations issued to the people through the prophetic intermediary. Lastly, factored into this model are the events that confirm the truth of the prophet's message. These "evidences of confirmation" are important factors in the audience's willingness to accept the prophet as a legitimate intermediary by independently confirming the authenticity of the prophet's divinely-called role.[56]

Overholt tests his model against two prophetic figures from the Native American tradition (Wovoka of the Paiute tribe, leader in the Ghost Dance movement of 1890, and Handsome Lake of the Seneca tribe, who received revelations from 1799 to 1815). But Overholt also uses material from the career of the prophet Jeremiah, which just as effectively illustrates the components of his model. For example, there is the material found in chapter eighteen of the canonical book of Jeremiah. To begin with, Jeremiah witnesses a potter working on a vessel and receives a message from God likening the people of Israel to clay in the potter's hand. Then Jeremiah is instructed to tell the residents of Jerusalem: "Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings"(Jer 18:11). The third category of Overholt's model is represented in the next verse, which contains the people's response to Jeremiah's prophetic message: "It is no use! We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will"(Jer 18:12). This negative response is

[56] For descriptions of the overall process, see Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy*, 22-25; Overholt, "Problem of Cross-Cultural Comparison," 58-69.

indicative of much of the feedback Jeremiah received when delivering his messages as God's intermediary.

The remainder of Jeremiah chapter 18 can be categorized as examples of additional feedback and proclamation between these three conversation partners. For instance, after hearing the people's negative response to the word of the Lord, additional divine words are proclaimed by Jeremiah in verses 13-17. Then, in verse 18, the hearers give Jeremiah additional negative feedback in a response that both rejects his authority and threatens his person. The final verses in that chapter (verses 19-23) include feedback that the prophet Jeremiah offers to God. It contains a personal lament bemoaning the rejection he has encountered and expressing concern over the dangerous plots that now threaten his life, all of which has come as a result of the messages he delivered on behalf of the Lord.

One advantage of Overholt's model is that it emphasizes the character of prophecy as a "social process."[57] Rather than considering prophetic activity as a passive process involving only two actors, Overholt builds upon the insights of scholars like Westermann and von Rad and shows how prophecy is a dialogical process. It involves information transmitted, information received, and feedback from all parties. There are invariably at least three elements involved: the revelation to the prophet, a proclamation based on that revelation, and an audience to whom the proclamation is addressed and whose reactions will be largely determined by how well the message makes sense in light

[57] Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy*, 20. It is important to recognize that prophetic activity is essentially a form of specialized communication, which by its nature is dynamic and interactional. Ibid., 19.

of their religious traditions and the current socio-political situation.[58] Overholt's model provides a way to look deeper than the content of prophetic messages to discover a level in which the various social dynamics associated with prophetic communication can be included in the overall discussion.

A second advantage to Overholt's model is that it can accommodate the interrelationships present in both a single prophetic act or in a series of prophetic encounters spread out over several years.[59] This is significant because prophetic activity does not occur in a vacuum or in isolation from the ongoing history of the prophet's community. As Robert Wilson points out, it is important not to analyze prophetic activity in isolation from its social matrix,[60] and one element in every such matrix necessarily is the aspect of temporality. Time is a critical component in any prophetic process. Prophets routinely build upon the themes and traditions from their community's religious past, while speaking words about present crises and future scenarios. Overholt's model is flexible enough to help chart the intrinsic temporal qualities of prophetic activity.

Third, Overholt's approach opens the way for an honest discussion about the nature of prophetic authority. As a general category, authority can be understood as the right or power to command, enforce, and influence others.[61] Once prophets are considered from a more anthropological perspective, as Overholt has done, the source of prophetic authority now has two loci. On the one hand, the intermediaries announce that

---

[58] Overholt, "Problem of Cross-Cultural Comparison," 60.
[59] This quality was not positively regarded by Norman Gottwald ("Problems and Promises in the Comparative Analysis of Religious Phenomena" *Semeia* 21 [1981]: 104), but Overholt succinctly answers this critique in the same journal ("Model, Meaning, and Necessity," *Semeia* 21 [1981]: 131.)
[60] Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, 2.
[61] *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 1976, s.v. "Authority"; see also "Power to enforce obedience; Power to influence action, opinion, belief" in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., 1989, s.v. "Authority."

they have been authorized by God to proclaim a particular message, making part of their authority self-ascribed and linked to an experience of personal revelation. On the other hand, the intermediaries' audience must decide whether to accept such claims to prophetic authority; "the social reality of prophecy depends upon this act."[62]

To better understand this dual-foci model of prophetic authority, each element needs to be examined briefly. The first component relates to the prophet's call as given by God.[63] Von Rad emphasizes that recipients of such calls are now burdened with commissions that set them in unique relationships with God and thereby confer upon them distinctive status within their own community. Because of this dynamic, prophetic call narratives are not to be seen as strict transcripts of what transpires between God and the chosen intermediaries. Von Rad argues that the written description of the call is something secondary to the call itself, primarily because its aim is to justify the authority of the prophetic figures in the eyes of their larger community.[64]

Overholt concurs in considering the personal call received by prophets as an experience that is "private and therefore essentially intangible and unverifiable by the members of the audience, who nevertheless assume that genuine prophets will have had such an experience."[65] Prophets may try to describe this private experience, such as when Isaiah tells of seeing the Lord of hosts seated on a heavenly throne (Isa 6:1-8) or the prophet Ezekiel briefly mentions how the heavens were opened for him and he saw visions of God (Ezek 1:1). More commonly, they simply assert that the word of the Lord

---

[62] Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy*, 70.
[63] Most biblical accounts of prophetic activity include some description of the prophet's call to this form of specialized ministry. E.g., Isa 6:1-8, Jer 1:1-10, and Ezek 1:1-3.
[64] Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:55.
[65] Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy*, 70.

has come to them and commissioned them to deliver a message to the people, as in the cases of Jeremiah (Jer 1:1-10), Hosea (Hos 1:2), Amos (Amos 1:1:1, 7:1), and others. What is of note is not the particular form that shapes prophetic call narratives; rather it is the expectation of the audience that some experience of divine commissioning has occurred between the prophet and God.

Two interrelated dynamics, then, are present in any discussion concerning the nature of prophetic authority. The prophets assert that God has chosen them, in that they insist that divine words and revelatory visions have been given to them. Yet prophets are also chosen by their audiences, in that people attribute authority to them through the community's willingness to see these figures as prophetic intermediaries. Overholt makes reference to several components that make up this ascription of prophetic authority.[66] First, the prophet's behavior usually coincides with the general pattern of behavior traditionally associated with prophets. It also should coincide with the religious and cultural traditions of the community, even as the prophet calls for innovations and re-ordering of priorities within the communal life. Second, confirmations of the prophet's call may be linked to miraculous acts and fulfilled prophecies. Third, the prophet usually possesses a high degree of rhetorical skill that involves a gift of explanatory power, in that the prophet's words bring clarity and guidance to the community during a time of crisis. All of these aspects related to prophetic authority can be summarized under the rubric of "perceived effectiveness."[67] As Overholt has put it quite succinctly, "whatever

---

[66] Ibid., 70-73.

[67] There does not need to be universal agreement about accepting particular prophetic figures as true intermediaries with the divine; however, some segment of the community has to acknowledge and confer authority upon prophets in order for them to function in that specific role within their social setting. "Intermediaries do not exist in a vacuum. They are integral parts of their societies and cannot exist without social guidance and support. This support need not come from the whole society, but it must be present in

authority they may get from on high, prophets are dependent upon audiences for their effective authorization."[68]

V. The Naming of Contemporary Prophets

The anthropological emphasis of Overholt's model does offer the advantage of seeing biblical prophetic figures in light of their social context, their changing temporal settings, and as persons dependent on both divine and communal sources of authority. But it must be conceded that Overholt's primary interest moves beyond the scriptural witness concerning prophetic figures. His goal is to provide a model that may be used to analyze prophetic activity in a variety of cross-cultural and historical settings. Overholt has sought to find the commonality between the Mari prophets of the eighteenth century BCE, the classic Hebrew prophets of the eighth century BCE, and more modern figures like Handsome Lake of the early nineteenth century and the "cargo cult" figures of Melanesia from the late nineteenth century.[69] His core focus, then, extends beyond the parameters of biblical prophetic activity established for this dissertation.

In considering the question of whether contemporary examples of prophetic acts exist today, there is much value to be found in Overholt's model of the prophetic process. However, one other scholar has also considered a question similar to that already proposed, and his work brings a helpful precision to the broader analysis presented by Overholt. W. Sibley Towner composed an article in 1970 entitled "On Calling People 'Prophets' in 1970." Its intent was not "simply an exercise in language analysis"; rather

---

some form, or the intermediaries will disappear." (Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, 51.) See also Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy*, 70 n. 3.

[68] Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy*, 181.

[69] Overholt, "Problems with Cross-Cultural Comparisons," 55.

his investigation into the use of the term 'prophet' was part of the larger discussion concerning "the locus of authoritative moral and religious utterance" in his own time.[70] His topic was particularly apropos. In 1970, there were still 400,000 soldiers stationed in Vietnam and student protests disrupted campus life across the United States.[71] Two full years of effort at the Paris peace talks had failed to bring a conclusion to the fighting in Southeast Asia. Additionally, the entire nation was still reeling from the recent assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy. During that period of war and significant social upheaval, Towner reports that the use of the term 'prophet' enjoyed both prominence and favor in the years preceding and including 1970.

The first question he subsequently raises is whether this usage should be considered as synonymous with the usage of the term 'prophet' in the Hebrew scriptures. Towner cites Lindblom's definition, namely, a prophet is "a person who, because he is conscious of having been specially chosen and called, feels forced to perform actions and proclaim ideas which, in a mental state of intense inspiration or real ecstasy, have been indicated to him in the form of divine revelations."[72] This understanding of prophetic activity is bound up with a concomitant view of sacred authority, and it is in regards to this latter dynamic that problems can arise when the term 'prophet' is associated with non-biblical, contemporary figures. When Towner's article appeared, the word 'prophet' was being attributed to figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., Daniel Berrigan, Pope John XXIII, Malcolm X, Bob Dylan, and many others. Towner raises a question attempting to clarify the nature of continuity presumed to exist between the biblical prophets and the

---

[70] Towner, "On Calling People Prophets," 492.
[71] On May 4, 1970, four students protesting the Vietnam War were shot by the National Guard at Kent State University in Ohio.
[72] Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 46; Towner, "On Calling People Prophets," 494.

activity of modern, so-called "prophets." In offering an answer, he only attempts to speak from the perspective of biblical scholarship, while asserting that there is no way to talk about what the term 'prophet' means in an absolute sense. Rather, one can only approach this discussion in terms of how the title has been and is being used currently.[73]

Towner then enumerates four basic assumptions shaping his argument before listing four identifying characteristics of classical Israelite prophetism that should be used when analyzing any contemporary examples of analogous activity. His four assumptions are as follows:

> . . . that valid analogies between biblical situations and modern ones can be drawn; that biblical and traditional language can appropriately be used at such points; that certain persons might therefore legitimately be called prophets today; and that the hermeneutical exercise being undertaken is an important one for the preservation of precision in Jewish and Christian speaking – indeed, a vital one in a time when the prophetic model is being introduced widely and without careful qualification into political and social-ethical discussions.[74]

According to Towner, the four defining characteristics of Israelite prophetic activity are its stylistic traits, rhetorical form, constituent context, and the details of the message itself. Each characteristic merits a brief elaboration.

First, Israelite prophetic figures exhibited certain qualities of outspokenness and ecstatic behavior making it possible to speak of a particular 'style' associated with their religious activity. This may include manifestations of abilities to perform miracles or predict future outcomes. It may involve bold confrontations with political authorities, supported by a defiant belief that the words they are speaking come directly from God.

It is also possible to delineate identifying characteristics in the prophets' use of rhetoric. It might involve using "messenger formulas" to give authority to the

---

[73] Towner, "On Calling People Prophets," 495.
[74] Ibid., 496.

pronouncements. It might include stereotypical patterns of indictment, announcing times of woe and judgment soon to descend on the land. With the later prophets, it often involved using more poetic patterns of speech, coupled with allusions to the faith traditions of the past. Overall, the rhetoric was shaped to insure that the message to be delivered would be heard and remembered as effectively as possible by the intended audience.

Towner's third criterion relates to the various constituencies directly associated with prophetic activity. Sometimes the prophets had institutional roles, serving in the role of *nabî'* to the king. Figures like Samuel, Nathan, and Jeremiah could be included in that category. Though the prophets ministered to individuals both in the cult and the palace, their true constituency was the larger nation as a whole.[75] It would be this broader community that would heed or reject the prophets' pronouncements, as well as eventually decide whether to incorporate the prophets' teachings into the accepted record of their communal history.

The fourth, and in many ways most significant, feature of Israelite prophetic activity is the content of the messages proclaimed. As important as the other features of style, rhetoric, and acceptance by their constituencies actually was, the message was the central factor determining the acceptance and authorization of prophetic figures. Towner names several themes that mark many of the prophets' speeches and pronouncements. These include perennial calls for justice for the oppressed, indictments against corruption, demands for purification within the religious establishment, and promises of hope, peace, and future redemption if the people returned to patterns of spiritual obedience.[76] In most

---

[75] Ibid., 502.
[76] Ibid., 505.

cases, these messages reiterated the themes of earlier traditions held sacred by the community. They emphasized the involvement of God in the workings of history, the broader plan of salvation associated with the Lord, and promises of covenant relationship that gave hope even in times of trial.

One fascinating dynamic at work among the prophets is the tension between values that are both 'radical' and 'conservative.'[77] There is a challenge issued to kings and priests alike, radically speaking words of judgment and woe because of their patterns of unrighteous and unjust behavior. Yet through it all, there is a conservative heart to the prophetic message, calling the community as a whole to return to honoring the values and faithfully obeying the divine laws upon which their nation's covenant with the divine had been established.

Towner's exposition of these four identifying characteristics of prophetic activity is meant to highlight the fact that contemporary sources are tempted to ascribe the title 'prophet' to modern figures based on the presence of only one or more of these traits. For example, in 1970 the claims of premonition put forth by popular psychic Jeanne Dixon or the ecstatic behavior associated with the drug-culture promotions of Timothy Leary earned them the appellation of 'prophet' by some of the media. The stirring rhetoric of Dr. King's speeches or the social activist, church-based organizing work of Saul Alinsky garnered them the title of 'prophet' from some sources. And a whole host of figures, ranging from peace activist Daniel Berrigan to rock musicians Bob Dylan and Janis Ian, had been described (in 1970) as being 'prophetic' based on their particular messages.[78] If, however, the principal definition of the term 'prophet' comes from biblical traditions,

---

[77] Ibid., 509.
[78] Ibid., 499-507.

Towner argues that care must be exercised to ensure that the term's distinctive meaning not be stripped away through wrongful employment of the word itself.

Towner's model outlines four characteristics defining the distinctive aspects of prophetic activity. But the presence of these characteristics in and of themselves is not enough to merit the attribution of 'prophet' to a contemporary figure. Towner argues that from the perspective of biblical faith, "authentic prophetism always involves consistency with central, given principles . . . [and] passionately asserted religious-truth claims." Examples of this include affirmations that God exists, God is good, God loves all God's people, God redeems all of God's world, God has a kingdom to which the earthly kingdoms are being conformed, and God summons us into that particular future.[79] Even though prophets call for change and reform, this call needs to arise out of a fidelity to the core values and doctrines of the faith. Therefore, Towner argues, to be called a prophet today, the primary criterion is a conservative orientation linking authentic prophetic activity with doctrinal orthodoxy as expounded in the content of the prophetic words.

The title 'prophet' continues to be ascribed to some contemporary figures. In the classroom and through the news media, some people are identified as modern day prophets. For example, William Ramsay's text, entitled *Four Modern Prophets*, singles out Walter Rauschenbusch, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gustavo Gutiérrez, and Rosemary Radford Ruether for that title. Ramsay proposes that "the same Holy Spirit which inspired the biblical writers has enabled these four individuals to understand and present to us the ancient prophets' message of social justice for the twentieth century."[80] A

---

[79] Ibid., 508-509.
[80] William Ramsay, *Four Modern Prophets: Walter Rauschenbusch, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gustavo Gutiérrez, Rosemary Radford Ruether* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), 3.

similar text by G. McLeod Bryan is titled *Voices in the Wilderness: Twentieth-Century Prophets Speak to the New Millennium.* The selection of the five "prophets" (Martin Luther King, Jr., C.F. Beyers Naude, Clarence Jordan, Jaroslav Stolar, Huston Smith) is significantly influenced by the fact that they are all people with whom the author had personal contact. But Bryan offers his definition of a prophet, saying it is "a person who discerns the signs of the times, who lives apart from the times in order to bring judgment upon them, and who provides a vision to redeem the times."[81] And lest these qualities of discernment, judgment, and visioning are too ambiguous, Bryan goes a step further and lists six criteria for recognizing authentic, modern prophets.

> First, their voices must have had universal implications: though belonging to a definitive stream of history, a particular people, they were able to transcend it and speak to all of humanity. Second, they must have been prophetic in the sense of projecting upon the future a dream that improved the status of humankind. Third, their varying voices must have emerged from concrete situations whose variegated patterns apply unfortunately to the majority of humans. . . . Fourth, their voices derived from a moral integrity, an expression of their freedom of conscience. . . . Fifth, their voices were shaped by a faith commitment to Jesus of Nazareth, whose Church gave them birth. . . . Sixth, their voices stood for peace with justice. In a world obsessed with militarism and often engaged in warring madness, their voices spoke for nonviolence, forgiveness, and reconciliation.[82]

Bryan's criteria are of particular value because they articulate categories of prophetic activity that can be recognized both from inside and outside a faith community context. Given that the context for any discussion of twenty-first century prophetic activity is the postmodern, even post-theistic, global society, the ability to transcend old boundaries and "speak to all of humanity" is crucial.

---

[81] G. McLeod Bryan, *Voices in the Wilderness: Twentieth-Century Prophets Speak to the New Millennium* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1999), 3.
[82] Ibid., 1.

VI. The Necessary Move from Prophetic Activity to Prophetic Acts

In this brief survey of some of the scholarly understandings of prophets and the companion literature related to contemporary ascriptions of prophetic activity, the outline of a methodological impasse has begun to emerge. As was previously stated, when the question is asked about the possibility of contemporary prophetic activity, some reply that authentic prophetic activity concluded with the demise of the ancient Israelite monarchy.[83] For these scholars, the paradigm for prophetic activity is made to coincide with the Hebrew scriptures' descriptions of prophets. Some authors chose to describe this model as a two-party process in which God's revelation comes to a *nabî'*, who serves as a mouthpiece proclaiming the divine words. Prophetic speech is then set apart from other forms of discourse by the use of a 'messenger formula,' which serves the dual purpose of ascribing authority to the words spoken as if by Yahweh and ascribing authority to the messenger entrusted with those words.

Later biblical scholarship expanded upon this description to acknowledge that the intrinsic nature of prophetic communication is more dialogical and interactive. Prophets do much more than simply pass on the verbatim "words of the Lord." They shape the message by how they choose to communicate it, both verbally and non-verbally, and they expand the message by the other words of judgment or consolation that are offered along with the 'messenger formula' material. Also, in addition to seeing the prophetic process as involving God and the *nabî'*, scholars have come to realize that the role of a third party

[83] This scholarly view is echoed in 1 Maccabees, where it says, "So there was great distress in Israel, such as had not been since the time that prophets ceased to appear among them." (1 Macc 9:27). Cf. also 1 Macc 4:46, 14:41.

(the audience) needs to be factored into the prophetic equation. Prophecy should not be considered a uni-directional process. Feedback from all three partners is intricately involved with the entire event. Sometimes this is difficult to pinpoint, given the nature of the scriptural witness and its cloaking of the social dynamics involved in prophetic activity behind a 'veil of theology.'[84] But exegetical tools ranging from narrative criticism to anthropological studies have helped modern scholars readily accept the interactive quality of all authentic prophetic activity.

Given this general consensus on the dynamic nature of prophetic activity, several scholars have advanced the discussion one step farther. They have affirmed the existence of an analogous relationship between the term 'prophet', as it is used in the Hebrew scriptures, and the way it can be ascribed to contemporary figures. Overholt has approached this theme from the perspective of anthropology. He insists that comparisons of prophetic figures from different cultural and temporal settings are possible, because the process by which all prophetic activity emerges and is authenticated "conforms to the same general pattern."[85] Towner speaks from a more biblical perspective, asserting that valid analogies can be drawn from the specific contexts, both ancient and modern, in which prophets have appeared and that is why it is legitimate to refer to prophetic figures today.[86] Ramsay speaks of prophets today because of the analogous manner in which various individuals of faith communicate to the modern world biblical visions about God's reign and God's insistence on social justice. Bryan also offers criteria by which contemporary figures could be judged concerning their semblance to prophets of old.

---

[84] Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy*, 20, 81.
[85] Ibid., 15.
[86] Towner, "On Calling People Prophets," 496.

For all of these authors, formal similarities with biblical prophets were not held to be determinative. Modern prophetic figures were not restricted to those who used 'messenger formulas' or who claimed privileged status on the basis of private revelations. For these authors, context is just as important as content. If a general pattern of revelation-proclamation-feedback occurs (Overholt), or if the style, rhetoric, and constituencies are analogous to Israelite examples (Towner), or if they speak in a way that has universal implications and offers a moral vision applicable to the majority of humans (Bryan), then it is legitimate to appropriate the term 'prophets' for modern figures.

Herein lies the methodological impasse. Based on a faith perspective about the nature of divine revelation and the authority of the biblical canon, the Israelite prophetic figures have been established as the standards against which all subsequent Jewish and Christian prophetic activity is to be judged. Implicit in much of this authenticating process is the claim that prophetic activity effectively ended with the demise of the monarchy. Yet the term 'prophet' has been ascribed to figures subsequent to the Israelite monarchy and continues to be ascribed in modern times.

Identifying authentic prophetic activity now seems to focus primarily on the audience expectation of (and response to) the supposed prophetic activity.[87] Audiences are guided by their understanding of religious traditions, their critical intelligence, and any future substantiation ("evidences of confirmation") that, in hindsight, lends support to their response. But it is my contention that any authenticating process for modern

[87] Overholt makes this point by drawing on a partial verse from Matthew – "You will know them by their fruits" (Matt 7:16a). He says that the "audience has to judge whether the visible behavior – the fruits – of a particular actor merits the acknowledgment (or suggests the denial) that this is an occurrence of genuine intermediation." (Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy*, 183.)

prophetic figures is inherently ambiguous: no definitive interpretation of the faith traditions exists against which all claims can be objectively measured;[88] no simple principle of "majority rule" can be trusted when the subject is the challenging, often counter-cultural message of prophets; and in modern settings it has not been uncommon for the title of prophet to be ascribed before the benefit of hindsight can verify any such usage. Therefore, is the term 'prophet' being misapplied today? Is it being falsely ascribed in order to persuade the general population that a contemporary figure's words and deeds should be accepted as divinely-inspired?

Perhaps many of these difficult questions have arisen because scholarship has been so focused on the spoken content of prophetic activity. The question has in effect been framed this way: Can the verbal messages of contemporary figures be interpreted as analogous to the earlier sayings of biblical prophets, thereby making the former authoritative for life today? To attempt to answer this question, the *ipsissima verba* of figures from two entirely different social-historical contexts would have to be compared.

What has been overlooked in most discussions is the fact that prophetic communication is not restricted to what is spoken. Many prophets have performed symbolic acts, which were largely nonverbal embodiments intended to communicate aspects of the divine will for a particular audience. They were by nature public and interactive events, intended to be persuasive and recognized as authoritative. In many cases, these prophetic acts also transcended the barriers inherent in much verbal communication and communicated their message to groups outside the prophet's

[88] Ibid., 182.

immediate community.[89] The aforementioned methodological impasse can be perhaps best negotiated by shifting the focus away from the spoken content of prophetic figures and moving it toward the more tightly defined category of nonverbal prophetic sign-acts. This will be the focus of the next chapter.

[89] The difference between verbal and nonverbal prophetic acts may seem subtle, but it is actually quite significant. Both depend on a community's shared "language," whether this language helps define words that are spoken or interpret actions that are witnessed. Yet spoken words are relatively inefficient tools of communication. One's tone of voice and facial expression invariably communicate more than the actual words spoken. All forms of oral communication are affected by which words are heard by an audience, how well any rhetorical subtleties are grasped by the listeners, and whether the full richness of the vocabulary is appreciated by both partners in the conversation. Because interpretation and understanding have to happen concurrently with listening, the overall process of oral communication is relatively inefficient. By contrast, when a prophetic act is performed and witnessed by an audience, the interpretative component follows afterward. This process may be guided by an explanation given by the prophetic actor, however, the audience is also involved in shaping the interpretation. Sometimes an interpretation is arrived upon that surpasses the initial intent of the prophet. Overall, a stronger form of communication occurs when it is not reliant solely on spoken words.

Chapter 2:
Understanding Prophetic Acts

I. Definitions and Designations

In this chapter, prophetic activity will be looked at in greater detail, although less from the perspective of the prophet performing the act and more as an overview of the specific event itself. Some of the scholarly material on prophetic acts will be surveyed in order to arrive at a tentative definition of prophetic acts in general. Then several acts recorded in the biblical book of Jeremiah will be closely examined to help in discerning some paradigmatic characteristics of authentic prophetic activity. The chapter concludes with a brief consideration of prophetic acts as described in the literature of the Second Temple, New Testament, and early church periods.

The broad category of prophetic activity, as discussed in the prior chapter and as delineated in the biblical scriptures, can be subdivided into categories of prophetic speech and prophetic acts. The former has received the greater attention, particularly due to its close affinity with discussions about the revealed "word of the Lord" and about the precise content of prophetic messenger formulas. Prophetic speech relates to the verbal record of prophetic activity, namely, things said, remembered and recorded by the prophet's followers. The latter category of prophetic acts relates to nonverbal prophetic

activity, namely, things witnessed, described and then eventually recorded in written form by the prophet's followers.[1] It includes both surprising actions done before an audience and expected actions left undone. Although these acts are nonverbal, they can be understood as a type of *verbum visibile*, sharing in the qualities associated with revelatory divine words.[2]

Scholars doing research into the life and practices of the Israelite prophets have chosen a variety of phrases to describe nonverbal prophetic acts. One of the early expositions describing this particular category is Georg Fohrer's *Die symbolischen Handlungen der Propheten* (1953). Fohrer's text provides a brief summation of works that preceded his study, most of which used the terminology of "symbolic acts of the prophets."[3] Fohrer goes on to provide a list of thirty-two examples of these *symbolischen Handlungen*, a number that, at first glance, seems in keeping with the work of two of his predecessors, van den Born (32 examples) and Groenman (31 examples). Yet each of the

---

[1] There is no single Hebrew term that encompasses the category of prophetic acts. Three words used in scripture are routinely associated with prophetic acts, but all three terms also have broader meanings that have nothing at all to do with prophets. There are over forty occurrences of the word 'mashal' (מָשָׁל), which refers to parables, proverbs, and allegories. There are also thirty-four occurrences of the word 'mopheth' (מוֹפֵת), which is commonly translated as 'wonder.' But there are over eighty occurrences of the word 'oth' (אוֹת), which is rendered as 'sign' or 'token' and of the three terms is the most closely associated with prophetic figures. Samuel tells Saul about signs from God that prove the Lord is with him (1 Sam 10:7, 9). Isaiah tells Hezekiah about a sign regarding Judah's downfall as depicted in the coming harvests (2 Kings 19:29-31). Jeremiah justifies his purchase of the field in Anathoth by pointing back to the God who worked signs and wonders in the land of Egypt (Jer 32:20, 21). Ezekiel reminded his audience of the same wonder-working God and invoked the Sabbath rest as a sign of their covenant with the Lord (Ezek 20:20). Unfortunately, these terms are not helpful guides in this particular discussion because all three terms primarily refer to activity that God is performing, as opposed to acts done by prophets in order to express God's will.

[2] J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 172.

[3] H. W. Robinson "Prophetic Symbolism" *Old Testament Essays* (1927); A. van den Born *De symbolische handelingen der Oud-testamentische profeten* (1935); A. W. Groeman, "De symbolische handelingen der Oudttestamentische propfeten" (1942); L. Suarez, "La realidad objetiva de las acciones simbolico-profeticos" (1943); B. Alfrink "Profeet en symbolisch handeling" (1948).

three scholars has their own criteria for prophetic acts and only about twenty examples are on all of their lists.[4]

The second chapter of Fohrer's study explores each of his thirty-two designated prophetic acts, both in terms of its biblical setting and its relation to other non-biblical parallels.[5] In this analysis, Fohrer offers three helpful characteristics of authentic prophetic acts: they are actual performances (*tatsächliche Ausführung*), conscious acts (*bewusste Ausführung*), and intentional goal-oriented deeds (*absichtlich-zweckhafte Ausführung*).[6] First, although some claim that accounts of prophetic acts have no basis in reality, Fohrer argues that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to provide generally accepted (*allgemeingültige*) reasons against the actual performance of prophetic acts. Since many of the scriptural texts themselves include descriptions of what transpired at these prophetic events, as well as the responses from the witnesses to these events, it is reasonable to conclude that many of the prophets' symbolic acts actually occurred. Second, by emphasizing that prophetic activity is conscious in nature, Fohrer challenges those who would view these occurrences solely as the result of ecstatic mental states. As important as inner motivations and unconscious impulses are, the psychology of prophetic acts should not be exaggerated to suggest that the prophet is unable to act in a clear and conscious manner.[7] Third, the symbolic acts should not be seen as spiritual

---

[4] W. David Stacey, *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1990), 66.
[5] Fohrer uses comparative material from other cultures and faiths, ranging from ancient Greece, Babylon, Egypt, and Phoenicia to Russian folklore, African traditions, and South Pacific rituals. The wide-ranging diversity of the illustrative material, however, could be seen as fostering an appearance of arbitrariness.
[6] Georg Fohrer, *Die symbolischen Handlungen der Propheten* (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1953, 1968), 74-93.
[7] Fohrer, *Die symbolischen Handlungen*, 88.

insights arising only by virtue of hindsight; they are quite intentional acts done to embody a particular word of the Lord for a specific time and situation.[8]

Writing somewhat later than Fohrer, Gerhard von Rad chooses to identify the category of prophetic activity by using the terminology of "symbolic actions."[9] He acknowledges a debt to both H. W. Robinson's 1924 article and Fohrer's research. But von Rad moves the discussion forward by emphasizing the efficacy of sacred signs in the realms of the cult, law, and medicine.[10] He stresses that the category of prophetic symbolic actions was not unique in and of itself; what was striking was the message being expressed by the prophetic acts. Originally the acts functioned like portents, offering warnings and predictions about future events to a particular audience. But they also could refer to present crises, suggesting to the audience that the future course of history was still open-ended and dependent on how people of faith responded to the prophet's acts and words of warning.[11]

Where von Rad's analysis falters is when he asks the rhetorical question: "Do not symbolic actions sometimes seem to conceal more than they reveal?"[12] To illustrate his point, von Rad points to the naming of Isaiah's children (Isa 8:1-4) and Isaiah's walking around barefoot and naked (Isaiah 20) and suggests that the meaning of those prophetic signs was not apparent for many years. One interpretation of Isa 20:3 would argue that Isaiah followed the Lord's command for three years before being given an explanation

---

[8] "Es wird häufig zutreffend erkannt, dass die prophetischen Handlungen absichtlich ausgeführt worden sind und einen bestimmten Zweck folgen: Sie sollen ein Jahwewort *veranschaulichen*, verstärken oder bekräftigen. Sie dienen der prophetischen Wortverkündigung und gehören zu ihren homiletischen Mitteln. Sie sind *media praedicationis*." (Fohrer, *Die symbolischen Handlungen*, 91.)
[9] Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965), 95-98.
[10] Ibid., 2:96.
[11] Ibid., 2:97-98.
[12] Ibid., 2:96.

for his strange behavior; but even if that is valid, this is an exception to the general pattern of prophetic actions. Even when prophetic acts take a significant amount of time to unfold (Isaiah's naming of his children, Ezekiel's lying on his side for more than fourteen months, etc.), an explanation for the drawn-out events is given to the prophet at the beginning of the prophetic process. It is my contention, then, that the act does not conceal more than it reveals; the prophet is always able to articulate for his audience the significance and warning being embodied, even if the duration for the act is quite lengthy.

In the work by Thomas Overholt surveyed earlier, he uses the vocabulary of "acts of power." He has a much broader definition of these prophetic acts than the authors previously mentioned, as is evident by his comment that more than sixty examples of such actions can be found in the Hebrew Bible.[13] Overholt makes a distinction between acts that are within the capacity of any person to perform, such as naming children, breaking a pot, or wearing a yoke, and those acts that appear to abrogate the laws of nature.[14] He also sets out three basic ground rules for prophetic acts, namely, that they are undertaken at the command of Yahweh, they are usually accompanied by an interpretation, and that Yahweh's promise guarantees that the symbolized event will take place.[15] Being guided by an anthropological perspective, Overholt considers his thesis in light of the Elijah-Elisha scriptural material as well as material related to Wovoka, a Native American shaman, and to the Tungus people of Siberia. These descriptions of non-Israelite "acts of power" help begin to articulate how the category of prophetic activity might be recognized if found in a more contemporary setting.

---

[13] Thomas Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 87.
[14] Ibid., 87-88.
[15] Ibid., 90.

Another contemporary scholar is Kelvin Friebel, whose published dissertation utilizes the compound word "sign-acts" to identify this sub-category of prophetic activity. He defines sign-acts as "nonverbal behaviors (i.e. bodily movements, gestures and paralanguage) whose primary purpose was communicative and interactive," acknowledging that this definition is "broader than the traditional connotations of the appellation 'symbolic action.'"[16] By rejecting alternative terminology and emphasizing how the prophetic act also functions as a 'sign,' Friebel is bringing his interest in communication theory to bear on this subject.

It was suggested above that von Rad went too far in arguing that prophetic acts conceal more than they reveal. Friebel offers a mediating position when he describes the inherently ambiguous nature of nonverbal behavior.[17] First, he claims it must be acknowledged that nonverbal acts cannot fully express all possible syntactical constructions.[18] Second, nonverbal acts are ambiguous both in terms of what the actions are depicting and what is the specific meaning of the actions.[19] Friebel distinguishes between non-conventional acts, which raise questions in the audience's mind about what is being represented, and more representational acts, which raise questions about what message the prophet is trying to tell them. Third, the Israelite prophets were skilled enough communicators to use the ambiguity inherent in their nonverbal acts in order to delay initial rejection or deflect initial counter-arguments. This was possible because as the audience is forced to grapple with the nuances of the prophet's acted-out message,

---

[16] Kelvin Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts: Rhetorical Nonverbal Communication*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 283 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 14, 15.
[17] Ibid., 23.
[18] Ibid., 415.
[19] Ibid., 416.

they are not immediately aware that the prophet is speaking against their own point of view.[20] In most cases, any ambiguity is cleared up once the prophet offers a verbal clarification about the witnessed sign-act. However, a degree of subtle obfuscation by the prophet can be helpful in gaining a hearing for words of judgment or warning that would otherwise fall on deaf ears.

The strongest part of Friebel's presentation is his description of the four traits associated with the process of rhetorical, prophetic communication.[21] They are attention, comprehension, acceptance, and retention. He succinctly defines them in this way:

> In order for a communication to be persuasive, it must first gain and then maintain the audience's attention. 'Attention' means not only gaining attention in order to deliver the specific message, but also giving the issues a hearing by focusing the attention on the message content and not just on the rhetor and the delivery style. Besides dealing with the audience's attention, a persuasive communication must also be understood (i.e. comprehension), mentally rehearsed and remembered by the spectators (i.e. retention), as well as provide incentives to alter the behaviors or attitudes (i.e. acceptance).[22]

Friebel's use of the phrase 'sign-acts' does successfully highlight the stress on communication theory in his own text; however, since he is only focusing on acts done by Jeremiah and Ezekiel, it would be redundant for him to use the phrase 'prophetic acts.' Because the focus of this dissertation goes beyond the biblical examples, the phrase 'sign-acts' does not function adequately when seeking to understand the nature of possible contemporary prophetic acts.

One additional author's preference in naming this particular category remains to be mentioned. W. David Stacey opts for the phrase "prophetic drama" as the best way to

---

[20] Ibid., 415.
[21] For these categories, Friebel is indebted to, among others, Carl I. Hovland, Irving L. Janis and Harold H, Kelley, *Communication and Persuasion: Psychological Studies of Opinion Change*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).
[22] Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 74-75.

capture the temporal-sequential quality of prophetic acts. Avoiding the more common terminology of 'signs' and 'symbols,' Stacey chooses the broader term of 'drama' because it can accommodate representations of the past, present, imminent future, and distant future without difficulty.[23] His term is not only broader in a temporal sense, but also a quantitative sense, in that Stacey claims there are more than forty examples of prophetic drama in the Hebrew Bible.[24]

Instead of only focusing on this particular noun (drama), Stacey also emphasizes the adjective modifying the noun, namely, that these dramas are carried out by prophets. He insists that there is a "mysterious potency" associated with prophetic figures and that they themselves are symbols, representing "the immanence, the power, and the unpredictability of the divine word."[25] Aspects of their personal lives are important components in the overall prophetic message they deliver to their community, as is evident when one considers Isaiah's naming of his children, Hosea's marriage, or Jeremiah's celibacy and avoidance of funerals and festivities.[26] When taken together, the combination of deliberate, specific acts carried out at the behest of God by members of a peculiarly gifted group within a faith community means that prophetic actions can and should be seen as belonging to a class by themselves.[27]

Stacey's analysis helpfully emphasizes that prophetic dramas do not necessarily point forward to future events or future times of coming judgment. Most prophetic acts

---

[23] Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 22.
[24] Ibid., 3. In actuality, Stacey's expositions on the biblical texts related to prophetic dramas, as found in chapters 7-13 of his book, add up to 48 examples – a figure about midway between the numbers suggested by Fohrer (32) and Overholt (60).
[25] Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 60, 61.
[26] Ibid., 219.
[27] Ibid., 62.

are intentionally focused on the present.[28] In fact, the essence of the prophetic drama involves the recognition by the prophet of a bond between the immediate condition and the divine realm as understood to be grounded in Yahweh.[29] In the last paragraph of his book, Stacey describes this essential quality in the following way:

> Yahweh called into being both the reality and the [prophetic] drama. . . . Drama and reality stand over against each other, mutually dependent and interpreting each other. The drama presents, focuses, interprets and mediates the reality. It also modifies the reality, because, in so far as the attitude of the people is a significant element in the total event, response to the drama contributes something to the reality. Such a view of prophetic drama helps to unlock the world of the prophets and the thought of the Old Testament.[30]

This important insight will be revisited and expanded upon in subsequent chapters in terms of the theological and ethical grounding of authentic prophetic acts.

Having surveyed the terminology scholars use in their discussions of prophetic acts, it is also important to clarify what terms are commonly avoided in reference to this specific category, in particular, adjectives such as cultic, symbolic, and magical. First, prophetic acts are not to be equated with cultic or ritual acts primarily because the former tend to be deliberate acts that occur once for all, while the latter are commonly repeated at regular intervals. Because of this intended repetition, cultic acts are more general in their focus, relating only partially to the particular needs and reality at the time when the act is celebrated. For example, the Passover rituals point back to the exodus from slavery, yet they are repeated each year to give strength for overcoming present day bondage to false gods and earthly powers.[31]

---

[28] Ibid., 224.
[29] Ibid., 256.
[30] Ibid., 281-282.
[31] Ibid., 62. Consider the instructions regarding Passover observance given by King Josiah (2 Kings 23:1-3, 21) and King Hezekiah (2 Chr 30:1-9), as well as the summaries in Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 16.

Prophets may be guided by the general categories commonly associated with cultic rituals, but they are traditionally instructed to perform their acts in response to specific situations and in reference to particular times of crisis. To put this another way, the difference between cultic actions and prophetic acts is reflected in their contrasting directions of interpretation. The cultic action moves from a generalized ritual to applications for particular and immediate needs, while the prophetic act tends to move from a particular and deliberate action to broader implications that refer to more general aspects of the faith narrative. As Stacey describes it, "huge events are focused in brief actions; a nation in mourning is seen in a single man; a rotten garment means apostate generations; . . . [it involves] a single reality that is at once universal and precise."[32]

Second, prophetic acts should not be too readily equated with symbolic acts. Von Rad practically treats these two phrases as being synonymous, however he does comment that prophetic acts are more than "mere" symbols. They are not merely illustrative devices assisting the presentation of an oral message. They are "intensified form[s] of prophetic speech," projecting "a detail of the future into the present [and thus beginning] the process of realization."[33] Von Rad argues that symbolic actions occur in many different cultural settings; however, the surprising messages associated with prophetic acts set them apart from more general symbolic behavior.

Fohrer titled one of his chapter subsections "*Die prophetische Handlung als Symbol.*" Yet, like von Rad, he would argue against a facile identification between

---

[32] Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 48.

[33] Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:96. In using this language, von Rad echoes the theological position of Paul Tillich, who held a high regard for symbols and insisted one should never say "only a symbol." More will be said about this in the next chapter. See Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 45.

prophetic acts and "*profanen symbolischen Handlung.*"[34] Fohrer argues that the scriptures are full of examples of general symbolic acts, such as putting one's feet on conquered enemies (Josh 10:24), pouring out water (1 Sam 7:6), brushing the dust from one's shoes (Matt 10:14), and washing one's hands (Deut 21:6, Matt 27:24). While this symbolism may bring a depth of meaning to a particular situation, the symbolic act itself has neither power nor authority; it may instruct and guide, but it does not lead to actual salvation or judgment.[35]

Given that some degree of mutual dependence does exist between prophetic and symbolic acts, Morna Hooker offers a concise way to distinguish between the two categories. She suggests that the meaning and significance of common symbols is readily apparent to all who are familiar with a particular set of conventions; for example, the convention of a flag flying at half mast is a symbolic way of showing respect for a recently deceased person. However, prophets "gave a unique meaning to actions which were not otherwise necessarily understood as conveying any particular significance."[36] They are not merely illustrative in nature, never a cliché or overly-familiar in content. Nor are they expressions of instrumental magic, designed to provoke the described events into occurring. Rather, Hooker suggests that prophetic actions are "dramatic presentations of the truth, an unveiling of what already exists in the divine intention . . . [that] points beyond itself to the purposes of God which are still to be worked out."[37]

---

[34] Fohrer, *Die symbolischen Handlungen*, 105.
[35] "[Die symbolischen Handlungen] geben den verwendeten Bildern einen Sinn, aber keine Kraft und Authorität, so dass zur Beherzigung einer Lehre aufgefordert, nicht aber Glück oder Unglück herbeigeführt wird." (Ibid., 14.)
[36] Morna Hooker is the widow of W. D. Stacey, and her text consciously builds on the earlier work of her husband. Morna Hooker, *The Signs of a Prophet: The Prophetic Actions of Jesus* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1997), 3-4.
[37] Ibid., 4.

Third, as has been just stated, the prevalent view is that prophetic acts are not to be considered forms of instrumental magic. It should be acknowledged, though, that scholars do not speak with unanimity on this subject. The most prominent voice of dissent belongs to Robert Carroll, who has argued that prophetic actions are full of "magical elements such as word-plays, incantations, gestures, performances, curses, and delegated actions."[38] He emphasizes that magic is especially dominant whenever rituals are performed whose purpose is manipulative and intended to evoke specific outcomes. Carroll is aware that other scholars tend to denigrate the influence of magical behavior by stressing that prophetic activity transforms and elevates primitive elements of magic into more theologically-sound expressions of the 'word of the Lord.' But Carroll counters that magic is such an essential component of religion that "this transformation may have been more apparent than real."[39] He sees all such reasoning as attempts to allow "anachronistic systems of explanation . . . to rationalize the mantic world."[40]

In fairness to Carroll's views, the prophetic behavior described in his lists does appear to be more magical than theological. Prophets of old could make water drinkable by adding salt (2 Kings 2:19-22), counteract poison in a stew with flour (2 Kings 4:38-41), and make an iron axehead float in water (2 Kings 6:4-7).[41] Yet those same lists are dominated by examples from the early monarchic period and involve prophets like Elijah and Elisha. In other words, the prominence Carroll attributes to magical behavior is primarily limited to the 'primitive prophetic figures', namely, those prophets about whom

---

[38] Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), 296.
[39] Robert P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed: Cognitive Dissonance in the Prophetic Traditions of the Old Testament* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 59.
[40] Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 296.
[41] For complete list, see Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed*, 58-59.

stories and legends were recorded rather than the later figures who have canonical books and writings attributed to them.[42]

Even those holding views counter to Carroll are still willing to acknowledge the influence of sympathetic magic upon prophetic acts.[43] However, such scholars emphasize a key distinction between magic and prophetic actions, namely, that magic is viewed as coercive of spiritual powers while, by contrast, prophets are encouraged, inspired, and even coerced by Yahweh to perform acts of prophetic witness.[44] These acts are not the result of human whims and wishes; neither are they efficacious in and of themselves.[45] They are not meant to serve personal needs, but always to serve the larger goal of proclaiming the divine word and revealing "Yahweh's plans and purposes concerning Israel, the elect people, and the pagan nations as belonging to . . . the Lord of the heavens and the earth."[46] And in some cases, magical acts used the present events to "bring the future into being," while prophetic acts worked to bring "the future into the present."[47]

According to the analysis of Georg Fohrer, the realm of magical behavior provides the foundation for the objects, manner, and structure of prophetic acts, but not

---

[42] "The term 'primitive prophets' is not used here in any derogatory sense, but simply to indicate the earliest phase of Old Testament prophecy, as it is known to us from the oldest traditions, preserved in the Books of Samuel and the Kings." (Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 47.)

[43] "There is no doubt a magical element in the activities of the early prophets, as they were conceived by their contemporaries and described by the old narrators. However, it would be wrong to make too much of the magical character of their words and acts. The distinctive character of Hebrew belief in God led to a more personal mode of thought, which counterbalanced, and indeed overcame, the magical element." (Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 54.)

[44] "The power of the magical action was dependent on the inner power connected with them and their performance in accordance with definite magical laws; the power of the prophetic actions like the power of the prophetic word was derived from Yahweh's will." (Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 172.) See also B. D. Napier, "Prophets, Prophetism" *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 913 and Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 42.

[45] Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy*, 90. See also Fohrer, *Die symbolischen Handlungen*, 10-11 and Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 45-46.

[46] Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 172 and Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 42.

[47] Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 42. To speak of the future, as in this quote from Friebel, refers to the God who is Lord of all history, and whose will for the future of the human realm can be made known in the present moment through the revelation of prophetic acts.

their essence.[48] While David Stacey, in essence, agrees with Fohrer that the magical elements are fundamentally overcome (*grundsätzlich überwunden*) in prophetic acts, the former scholar offers an overall argument of greater nuance. He argues that prior scholarship was too quick to postulate a strict causal relationship actively at work in magic acts.[49] In reality, magical behavior is a complex phenomenon that defies characterization in terms of simple cause and effect. It is commonly grounded in the cycles of nature, emphasizing a oneness with the world's rhythms rather than trying to coerce nature to conform to the rhythm of human life.[50] Magic is based on the notion that a fundamental "bond of identity" exists between the particular ritual and the larger reality – a notion shared by those who perform prophetic acts.[51]

Having said that, it is important to delineate the ways prophetic acts are dissimilar from practices of sympathetic magic.[52] Stacey argues that there are five primary differences between prophetic acts and magic rituals. First, prophetic dramas are generally not complex or esoteric, as is often the cause with sorcery. Second, both types of acts are usually performed by an individual, however prophetic acts invariably focus on a larger community and not simply on the desires of a single person. Third, magical acts develop out of a larger lore while prophetic acts tend to be unique events for a particular situation. Fourth, prophetic acts are commonly carried out before an audience, while the work of enchanters is usually covert and reliant on secrecy. Fifth, prophets act

---

[48] "Die magischen Handlungen liefern die Grundlage für Gegenstand, Art und Struktur der prophetischen Handlung, nicht aber für ihr Wesen." (Fohrer, *Die symbolischen Handlungen*, 95.)

[49] In particular, Stacey is speaking against the 1927 work of H. W. Robinson and his formula that magic constrains the unseen; religion means surrender to it. See Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 234-237.

[50] Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 244.

[51] Ibid., 251.

[52] This distinction is important both for understanding the intent and nature of prophetic acts as they are described in the biblical scriptures and in considering the intent and nature of possible contemporary prophetic acts.

from a sense of divine call and personal duty, even when the word from the Lord involves judgment against themselves and their community. By contrast, "no known form of magic would require the magician to carry out actions which would indicate the destruction of his own city, the captivity of his own people, and his own exile."[53] In light of the aforementioned reasons, Stacey offers a conclusion that paraphrases Fohrer's position: Prophetic acts preserve the outer form of imitative magic while containing the inner substance of Yahwist theology.[54]

The discussion thus far leads to the following preliminary conclusions. First, while a variety of terms have been used almost synonymously, the phrase 'prophetic acts' is the most common and most appropriate description of nonverbal prophetic activity. Second, the preceding survey of scholarly terminology has provided an overview of distinguishing features associated with prophetic acts. Drawing on the work of Fohrer, Lindblom, Overholt, Friebel, Hooker, and Stacey, the following traits of authentic prophetic acts can be tentatively identified. In terms of general characteristics, prophetic acts are deliberate and specific nonverbal acts performed by representatives of a "peculiarly gifted group called prophets"[55] active within a faith community. In terms of hermeneutical features, prophetic acts are communicative and interactive, usually preceded by a sense of divine call and followed by words of interpretation, with the intent of interpreting, modifying, and transforming human perceptions of reality in light of the divine nature and will of God. This yields the following working definition: *Authentic prophetic acts are deliberate, specific, communicative, and interactive acts performed by*

---

[53] Ibid., 254-256.
[54] Ibid., 261, 270. In making this claim, Stacey offers a direct refutation of the position of Carroll. Ibid., 269-270.
[55] Ibid., 60.

representatives of a faith community with the intent of transforming human perceptions of reality and actions in light of the divine nature and will of God. Having established a working definition of prophetic acts, it is now appropriate to compare this definition with some of the relevant material about prophets found in the Hebrew scriptural writings attributed to Jeremiah.

II. Prophetic Acts in the Book of Jeremiah

The majority of the biblical accounts of prophetic acts can be found in three canonical locations. There are several acts associated with the pre- and early monarchic prophetic figures, in particular Elijah and Elisha.[56] There are also sporadic acts associated with the prophets among the Twelve (Hosea, Micah, Zechariah) and Isaiah.[57] But by far the largest number of prophetic acts described in scripture are associated with Jeremiah and Ezekiel.[58]

For the purposes of this dissertation, the prophetic acts attributed to Jeremiah will be focused on instead of the acts attributed to Ezekiel for two reasons. First, the text of Ezekiel has endured a relatively troubled history within the field of biblical criticism, both due to the complexities of the text and the obscurity of its imagery.[59] Second, the majority of prophetic acts described in Ezekiel are intimately associated with the actual person of the prophet himself. Ezekiel is commanded to lie on his left side for over a year (Ezek 4:4-8), to shave his hair with a sword (Ezek 5:1-12), to impersonate someone going

---

[56] 1 Sam 15:27-29; 1 Kings 11:29-31; 18:20-46; 22:1-12; 2 Kings 2:12-14; 13:14-19.
[57] Hos 1:1-9; 3:1-5; Mic 1:8; Zech 6:9-15; 11:4-17; Isa 7:3, 10-17; 8:1-4; 20:1-6.
[58] W. D. Stacey attributes 29 of 48 prophetic acts to Jeremiah and Ezekiel, while G. Fohrer attributes 22 of 32 prophetic acts to these two figures.
[59] "In spite of all the work that has been done on the prophet Ezekiel, his prophecy still remains difficult to comprehend." (W. Zimmerli "The Special Form- and Traditio-historical Character of Ezekiel's Prophecy"

into exile (Ezek 12:1-7), to eat and drink while trembling (Ezek 12:17-20), to sob and cry with bitter grief (Ezek 21:6-13), and to refrain from mourning after the sudden death of his wife (Ezek 24:15-24). The prophet himself is depicted as being "a sign for the house of Israel" (Ezek 12:6b).[60] By contrast, there are only a handful of incidents in which the prophet Ezekiel performs prophetic acts separate from his own personal appearance or behavior.[61]

The inverse proportion is true for the prophet Jeremiah. Only a few prophetic acts are directly related to his personal appearance or behavior; the majority involve distinctive acts and objects intimately linked to the particular message he is constrained to deliver.[62] Even when Jeremiah dons an ox-yoke and parades it before the envoys of kings of the region, the focus is clearly on the Babylonian rule symbolized by the yoke rather than on him, as the particular person who happens to be wearing that implement.

What follows is a survey of six prophetic acts associated with the prophet Jeremiah. Each act will be briefly described from a narrative perspective and in light of insights gained through biblical criticism. Then the particular act will be compared with the criteria incorporated in the working definition of prophetic acts proposed above.

---

in *Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible: Selected Studies from Vetus Testamentum*, David E. Orton, ed. [Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2000], 11.)

[60] "The event which is proclaimed by the prophet [Ezekiel] seizes him again and again and makes him a part of the event itself. His person – even his body – participates in the event which his word proclaims." (Ibid., 15.) From a rhetorical perspective, it is quite possible for authentic prophetic acts to be expressed through the medium of the prophet's own physical personality; however, the interpretation of such events is complicated by having to make a determination about how much the act differs from customary behavior of the prophet, as well as to guess how much intimate physical discomfort is to be factored into any hermeneutical response to the prophetic act itself.

[61] Examples include the creation of a siege model (Ezek 4:1-3), the carving of a signpost (Ezek 21:18-23), the boiling of meat in a rusty cauldron (Ezek 24:1-14), and the inscribing of two sticks (Ezek 37:15-28).

[62] The three incidents recorded in Jeremiah 16 are some of the few prophetic acts that specifically focus on the behavior of the prophet himself. In verses 1-4, he is forbidden to marry or beget children; in verses 5-7, he is forbidden to grieve or enter a house of mourning; and in verses 8-9, he is barred from houses of feasting and festivities. Because these incidents are "negative" acts, involving the lack of typical social

Having an understanding of the paradigmatic nature of the prophetic acts described in the book of Jeremiah will prove helpful when the topic is expanded to consider modern and contemporary examples that are called prophetic acts.

A. The Spoiled Waistcloth (Jer 13:1-11)

This passage is among the most disputed and discussed texts in the book of Jeremiah.[63] It is a drama in three acts, shaped by three commands to the prophet from the Lord and concluding with four verses of interpretation. The primary difficulty centers on questions of historicity, namely, whether the written account accurately reflects a series of actual acts performed by Jeremiah during the years immediately prior to the period of the Babylonian exile (ca. 609-597 BCE). Scholarly opinion reflects the gamut of views, ranging from asserting that Jeremiah did precisely what is recorded to the belief that the entire incident was free-created and imaginary.[64]

An integral part of this discussion focuses on the location for this prophetic act's occurrence. It would seem unlikely that Jeremiah travels twice to the Euphrates river, involving round trip journeys of over 700 miles. Had he done so, it would mean that the prophetic act was performed far from his own faith community and spread out over a period of one to two years. Alternative sites closer to home have been suggested, such as

---

responses, they are less helpful in this dissertation than the more common examples of deliberately performed, "positive" prophetic acts recorded in the book of Jeremiah.

[63] Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 294.

[64] For citations of two sources stressing literal journeys to the Euphrates river, see Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 106 n. 62. Fohrer implicitly assumes Jeremiah traveled to the Euphrates (Fohrer, *Die symbolischen Handlungen*, 35). Some argue Jeremiah traveled to a location whose name was similar to 'Euphrates' (John Bright, *Jeremiah* [Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1965], 96), while others suggest Jeremiah visited a wadi and designated it as the 'Euphrates' (Douglas R. Jones, *Jeremiah* [Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Pub., 1992], 196). At least two scholars insist that the entire incident was either a vision (Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 132) or a bit of magical drama presupposing imaginary journeys to the Euphrates (Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 295).

Palestinian wadies (i.e., a valley, gulley, or riverbed that remains dry except during the rainy season) whose names are similar to the Hebrew term for the Euphrates (פְּרָת) and whose geography better reflects the rocky cliffs described in the Jeremiah passage. Given the ascendancy of the Babylonian Empire during this period and the real threat to Judahite sovereignty posed by that nation, some linkage between the prophetic act and Babylon is to be expected. However, since the primary message of the prophetic act relates to the question of faithfulness to God, the location at which the act occurs is of secondary importance.[65]

The sequence of events described in Jeremiah 13 begins with the purchasing of a brand new, linen waistcloth. This pristine garment is worn about the loins of Jeremiah as a personal undergarment. As a prophetic object, it represents the ideal of an unstained, intimate relationship between the Israelite people of the covenant and Yahweh. If this detail is overlooked, then the entire prophetic act is solely a pronouncement of stern judgment. But if it is given its due, it asserts that a foundation of love and intimacy precedes any subsequent acts of idolatry, rebellion, and divine punishment.[66]

In the course of this prophetic act, the unsoiled waistcloth becomes ruined and unfit to wear. The accompanying interpretation (vv. 8-11) focuses on the sin of idolatry as the source of this deterioration. The detail about burying the garment by the Euphrates links this sin either to allegiances with the Babylonian conquerors or social corruption that will occur during the Babylonian exile. While there is no scholarly unanimity about the precise source and nature of the sin spoiling the houses of Israel and Judah, there is a

---

[65] Here I concur with Brueggemann: "The identification of the site has no crucial bearing on interpretation." (Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming*, [Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Pub., 1998], 127.)

[66] See Jones, *Jeremiah*, 195, and Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, (Peabody: Prince Press, 1962), 2:118.

general consensus that Jeremiah's primary message is twofold: God is judging the nations for their waywardness, and spiritual ruin follows whenever people forsake an intimate relationship with the Lord.[67]

In moving away from a historical approach to this passage and toward a rhetorical study of the pericope, one key detail moves to the forefront. Who (if anyone) directly witnessed this prophetic act being performed? Neither in the act's description nor in the language of the act's interpretation is an audience acknowledged. The entire passage has the quality of a solo performance. Yet if the nature of prophetic acts is that they communicate a message to a larger community, some audience must be presumed to be included in this particular 'waistcloth drama.' If the prophetic act has two parts (hiding the waistcloth and a later retrieval of the ruined garment), an audience could have been present for both those events, especially if a relatively nearby setting is posited.[68] If the prophetic act is done in one part only, one would expect that an audience would be present for this command performance.[69] Even if no one witnessed the precise act, or as Stacey suggests, the entire scenario came to mind for Jeremiah after seeing a discarded waistcloth half-buried near the village of Para, an audience eventually had to hear either the prophet's account of the event itself or his theological insights prompted by an encounter with a ruined garment.[70] And, if not any time sooner, an audience certainly

---

[67] Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 129; Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 108-112; Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 295-297; Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 133-138.
[68] Jones, *Jeremiah*, 196; Bright, *Jeremiah*, 96; and Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 112-115.
[69] Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 295-297. Carroll envisions some form of enacted parable, heavy on magical content, in which Jeremiah parades his new waistcloth before an audience, buries it, and then retrieves a ruined garment before their eyes. The flaw in this theatrical approach to the passage is that it would require Jeremiah to have two waistcloths (one new and one ruined) at his disposal, making his prophetic act more sleight-of-hand than word-of-the-Lord.
[70] Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 133-138.

exists now, whenever the account of the prophetic act is read in the canonical book associated with the prophet Jeremiah.

Given these concerns about the passage's historicity, meaning, and rhetorical qualities, how closely does the described prophetic act correspond with our working definition? Since this account comes from the biblical book of Jeremiah, the presupposition here is that it is an act done by a "prophet active in a faith community" and by one who has a "sense of a divine call." This particular act with the waistcloth is deliberate in nature and is followed by expository words of interpretation.[71] The specificity of the act can be questioned, since it is not linked with a particular crisis or series of events; rather it speaks to a more general state of affairs (both political and theological) regarding the relationships of Judah to Yahweh and to Babylon. Having said that, it is a unique act within the Israelite corpus, arising from a series of quite specific actions, even if the interpretation of this act is more general in nature.[72]

Differing opinions might be offered as to whether the spoiled waistcloth drama truly qualifies as communicative and interactive. Friebel gives several reasons why this prophetic act is an example of effective rhetorical communication.[73] For example, using a commonplace article of clothing and making such a striking contrast between its pristine and ruined states would help ensure that the event would be remembered by those who witnessed or heard about it. The view that God's people should cling to the Lord like a piece of intimate apparel would strike a positive chord in Jeremiah's listeners, while

---

[71] Stacey questions whether the interpretative words in this pericope should be assigned to Jeremiah, believing that they are more in keeping with a later redactor who is well-acquainted with the series of events associated with the Babylonian siege and later exile. See Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 137;
[72] Fohrer offers some cultural parallels involving instrumental magic and waistcloth garments, citing examples from Melanesia, Australia, and Babylonian magicians. See Fohrer, *Die symbolischen Handlungen*, 34-35.
[73] Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 112-115.

effectively laying the foundation for the subsequent, stern word of judgment aimed at those who no longer "cling" to their prior levels of covenantal faith. And, depending on the location of the act itself, the act of displaying a fine linen waistcloth and then burying it in the muddy soil near a riverbed, would have "aroused attentiveness" and opened an "avenue of receptivity for [Jeremiah's] verbal explanations."[74] On the whole then, the passage as it has been passed on to us in its scriptural form qualifies as an example of an authentic prophetic act, as I am proposing to define it here.

B. The Broken Flask (Jeremiah 19:1-13)

The book of Jeremiah opens with a brief description of the commissioning words by which Jeremiah was appointed to be a prophet to the nations (Jer 1:1-10). But it is only in the book's twentieth chapter that Jeremiah is explicitly spoken of as a prophet (Jer 20:2).[75] This appellation comes as a direct response to the prophetic act described in Jer 19:1-13. Additional components of the response to this dramatic act include an angry confrontation with the temple chief officer Pashhur and a night in the stocks.[76] It is evident that what happened that day at the Potsherd Gate had tremendous repercussions for Jeremiah personally and regarding his divinely commissioned role as prophet.

Yet whenever this pericope is discussed, some of the first things mentioned by scholars are concerns that can be categorized as redaction criticism. A distinction is commonly made between material describing the actual prophetic act of smashing the potter's vessel (Jer 19:1-2, 10-11a) and expository material warning about divine

---

[74] Ibid., 113.
[75] Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 392.
[76] Cf. similar confrontation with the false prophet Hananiah in Jeremiah 28, although unlike the opponent in the latter incident, the words or opinions of Pashhur are not included in the description of the encounter.

punishment about to come upon Judah (Jer 19:3-9, 11b-13).[77] There is an awkward disparity between the command to gather together some of the elders and senior priests (Jer 19:1) and the speech addressed to the kings of Judah and all inhabitants of Jerusalem (Jer 19:3-9).[78] However, there is an implicit unifying device in this passage provided by the internal play on words between the term for 'flask' (baqbuq) and the word meaning "to make empty or void" (baqqoti).[79] It seems the prudent response is to acknowledge these redaction concerns, while not letting them sidetrack the discussion concerning the prophetic act as described in the text's final form. As Stacey points out,

> The finished text is important because it reveals how prophetic dramas were understood in Hebrew tradition. But equally, the original event and the original narrative reveal how the prophet himself and how his disciples understood them. Problems arise only if one or the other is neglected, or if someone tries to argue that the finished text was also the original form.[80]

Although the smashing of the potter's vessel has been called "one of the clearest dramatic acts that Jeremiah ever performed,"[81] a divergence of scholarly opinion exists concerning whether this act was primarily of a magical nature. Fohrer does not hesitate to designate it as a "magical-symbolic" act and links it with cursing acts from Mesopotamia,

---

[77] Jones separates vv. 1-2, 10-12 from the rest of the passage, which he considers either to be a secondary narrative or later hortatory material. (Jones, *Jeremiah*, 264.) Carroll limits the prophetic act to vv. 1-2a, 10-11, with vv. 14-15 serving as commentary on the completed act. The remaining material is called "a complex sermon against the cult in the valley." (Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 386, 388.) Stacey sees the basic story contained in vv. 1-2, 10-11a, with vv. 3-9, 11b-13 as a "Deuteronomic commentary on the story raising new issues and pressing different points." (Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 146.) Blenkinsopp suggests that most, if not all, of Jer 19:1-20:6 involves Deuteronomic reworking of prior Jeremian sayings. (Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, 2d ed. [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983], 267 n. 41.)

[78] Carroll tries to delineate three different strands of material in this passage, (namely, the incident of breaking an earthenware flask, a sermon against the fire-cult of Topheth, and words of denunciation aimed at the residents of Jerusalem), which later became combined during the historical development of this canonical material. See Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 392.

[79] Bright, *Jeremiah*, 131.

[80] Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 147 n. 26.

[81] Ibid., 147.

Nigeria, and Egypt.[82] Friebel lists ten scholars who consider Jeremiah's act to be similar to rituals described in Egyptian execration texts, in which names are first inscribed upon pottery bowls and then smashed to bring a curse upon those named.[83] Other scholars take a mediating position by suggesting that the act had an instrumental efficacy in that it set in motion the destructive punishment decreed by Yahweh.[84]

However, both Friebel and Brueggemann take the opposing view that the act itself was not primarily magical in nature. The latter scholar argues that it is unlikely that the audience witnessing Jeremiah's prophetic act fully believed in the causal power of sympathetic magic, while the former one stresses that a mere similarity in process does not necessarily mean a similarity in meaning and intent.[85] Friebel suggests it is entirely possible that Jeremiah is simply taking a relatively common verbal expression and acting it out non-verbally, not for reasons of sympathetic magic but for goals of effective communication.

Having said all that, there are three striking elements to this prophetic act. First, the smashing of the potter's flask is explicitly performed in front of an audience. The elders and senior priests are gathered to witness this act and hear Jeremiah's words of judgment. This contrasts with the earlier episode involving the linen waistcloth, in which the presence of an audience was implied but never clearly stated.[86]

Second, the location at which this prophetic act is performed adds both to its meaning and its ability to be remembered. The image of a shattered potter's vessel is a

---

[82] Fohrer, *Die symbolischen Handlungen*, 39.
[83] Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 121 n. 108. See also Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 147.
[84] Bright, *Jeremiah*, 133; Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 386-7.
[85] Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 177 and Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 121.
[86] Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 386.

powerful one that appears in other places in scripture.[87] Yet while the act of smashing a single clay flask before a crowd of people is rich in meaning, it is limited in impact when the scattered shards of the broken vessel quickly blend into the dust and soil upon which it is shattered. Jeremiah is explicitly instructed to lead his audience to the Potsherd Gate in the south wall of the city, which was apparently the gate used when removing garbage. Friebel describes this gate as taking its name from the discarded pottery rubble that littered the area.[88] Jeremiah's dramatic act is significantly enhanced both by the visual sight of heaps of potsherds covering the area where he smashed the clay flask and by linking his words of judgment with a location commonly associated with refuse and discarded trash. From a rhetorical perspective, choosing this particular site made it likely that Jeremiah's words would come to mind whenever people walked past the Potsherd Gate and saw the scattered remnants of broken pots.[89]

Third, the faith community in which Jeremiah lived and the people to whom he prophesied had long believed that the Davidic covenant established an inviolable promise of protection for the capital city of Jerusalem. The symbol of that covenant was the temple in Jerusalem, which was considered the eternal dwelling place of God. Earlier Jeremiah had warned the people to amend their ways or the divine covenant risked being broken. Merely repeating the mantra of "God's eternal temple" was of no use if their

---

[87] The most prominent Hebrew scripture reference is Psalm 2:9 ". . . dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." In an interesting note, it was precisely that passage which was set to music by Handel (in his oratorio "The Messiah") as the Air for Tenor ("Thou shalt break them") and used as the aria immediately preceding the famous "Hallelujah" chorus. Handel linked these strong words of judgment with exultant praise for the omnipotent Lord, as opposed to the more stern treatment this image is given in Psalm 2 or the bleak message of judgment passed on by the prophet Jeremiah.
[88] Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 116-117.
[89] Ibid., 124.

society continued to be marred by injustice and oppression.[90] With the prophetic act of smashing the potter's vessel, Jeremiah now tells the people that the covenant has been shattered. With ominous words and a dramatic visual deed, Jeremiah delivers the painful message that what was true is true no more, and "it can never be mended" (Jer 19:11b). Brueggemann offers this summary:

> Jeremiah is utterly a child of the tradition of Moses. He takes to its conclusion what has been implicit all through the tradition. Since Exodus 19:5-6 the whole of Israel's life with Yahweh has been governed by this uncompromising "if." The whole enterprise is finished. There is in the purview of the prophet no hint of continuing care, no second thought on Yahweh's part, no yearning or wistfulness. This is the end of the tradition, the end of all things sacred.[91]

With respect to the proposed working definition, the breaking of the potter's clay flask serves as a paradigmatic prophetic act, even given the redactional concerns already mentioned. A known and acknowledged prophetic figure performs a dramatic and deliberate act with an explicitly communicative purpose. It is done before a designated audience, making it an interactive act that leads to strong consequences for all involved. The specificity of the act is somewhat challenged, given that the condemnation of the fire-cult of Topheth possibly reflects concerns of later Deuteronomic editors. However the messages about the end of the covenant tradition and the imminent fall of Jerusalem still remain.

---

[90] See Jer 7:1-15, especially v. 4: "Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'"

[91] Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*, 177. Carroll points out that there is a crucial shift between the message of Jeremiah 18, where the potter's vessel can be re-worked into more worthwhile shapes, and the tone of Jeremiah 19, where the shattered flask can never be mended. As he puts it, "possibility gives way to fatal inevitability." (Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 385-386.) Stacey acknowledges that this bleak message by Jeremiah would seem to contradict the promise of later restoration as depicted in the Anathoth prophetic act of Jeremiah 32. Yet he argues that the two events represent different sides of the same reality. "With every calamity one may truly say, 'Things will never be the same again,' but this is not to deny the possibility of recovery." (Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 148.)

C. The Yoke of Babylon (Jeremiah 27-28)

The two chapters of Jeremiah 27 and 28 are routinely treated together as one pericope, even though there are details in the narrative that keep this long passage from being a seamless unit. For example, there is the discrepancy in the dating of the episode, depending on whether one relies on Jer 27:1 ("beginning of the reign of King Zedekiah") or Jer 28:1 ("at the beginning of the reign of King Zedekiah of Judah, in the fifth month of the fourth year").[92] Also, there is the stylistic difference between Jeremiah speaking in the first person in Chapter 27, but being spoken of in the third person in Chapter 28. What holds this section together, however, is its depiction of the confrontation between two prophets of Yahweh (Jeremiah and Hananiah) that occurred in 594 BCE before a gathering of envoys from five neighboring nations. At the center of this confrontation is a set of wooden bars normally worn by oxen that Jeremiah has now donned as a prophetic act performed before King Zedekiah and his visiting dignitaries.[93]

As might be anticipated, Fohrer ascribes a magical-symbolic meaning to Jeremiah's public wearing of an ox-yoke, and Carroll explicitly calls it a "magical act."[94] Yet there is no hint of instrumentality associated with Jeremiah's wearing the ox-yoke. His prophetic act does not magically cause the Babylonian domination of Judah; Babylon has already invaded Jerusalem and taken away an initial group of exiles. Friebel seems closer to the mark when he describes this event as an attention-getting act having "correspondence to a common metaphor."[95] The nonverbal act is combined with a verbal

---

[92] Bright, *Jeremiah*, 199; Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 139; Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 154.
[93] It should be noted that the Hebrew can be read in such a way as to suggest Jeremiah made up to six sets of ox-yokes and had the other sets delivered to Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon. Most scholars and bible translations follow the Septuagint version of this passage with its single ox-yoke. See Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 142; Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 151.
[94] Fohrer, *Die symbolischen Handlungen*, 41; Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 530.
[95] Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 148.

interpretation based on a well-known simile. Jeremiah is saying, in effect, "Just as I am wearing this yoke, so the nations should continue to wear the yoke of the king of Babylon."[96]

Although the passage explicitly identifies the yoke as that of the king of Babylon (Jer 27:8), implicitly it is described as being Yahweh's yoke, in that whatever sovereignty and power Nebuchadnezzar possesses, it has come from the Lord.[97] Much of the Jeremiah material takes an instrumental view of the other nations, seeing them as a means for God to punish Israel's disobedience.[98] In contrast to the more general view of sixth century BCE political events, which only sees the expansion of Babylonian hegemony, Jeremiah calls his community of faith to recognize that the real agent at work here is God, not Nebuchadnezzar.[99] This is not an easy message to communicate. It involves directly challenging the lingering theological notion that Yahweh dwells in the midst of Zion, thereby ensuring that the city of Jerusalem will be invincible and sacrosanct. Given that an initial incursion by the Babylonians into Jerusalem occurred in 598 BCE, this ideology has already been undermined.[100] However some were still prophesying that it was possible to wear God's "yoke" while casting off Babylon's yoke of domination. Jeremiah challenges this view head-on by taking his unwelcome message of continued political submission and prophesying it dramatically (thanks to the ox-yoke accessory) to all the ambassadors (Jer 27:3), to King Zedekiah (Jer 27:12), to the priests and the people

---

[96] Ibid., 143.
[97] Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 533; Bright, *Jeremiah*, 202; Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 241. Also, it should be noted that the book of Jeremiah uses two different spellings of the Babylonian king's name. In this dissertation, the spelling 'Nebuchadnezzar' will be used to the exclusion of 'Nebuchadrezzar.'
[98] Cf. Jer 25:8-9; Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 532.
[99] Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 255. Cf. "Jeremiah presented the submission to the Babylonians as tantamount to continued submission to God." (Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 147.)
[100] Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 240-241.

of Judah (Jer 27:16), and to Hananiah (Jer 28:5), who is a key proponent of the opposite position.

Hananiah has been described as a "mirror image" of Jeremiah: both are Yahwistic prophets who claim to speak on behalf of Yahweh; both come from outside of Jerusalem; and both prophesy to the priests and people in the temple of Jerusalem.[101] Both prophets even use messenger formulas when delivering their prophetic words. Yet Hananiah's message is much more attractive than Jeremiah's. He announces that the Babylonian yoke will soon be broken by God and within two years, the exiled King Jeconiah, the other exiles, and all the ceremonial vessels plundered from the Jerusalem temple will return home (Jer 28:2-4).[102] In making this claim, he is standing firmly upon the royal theology tradition of Zion, trusting that God will protect the temple and Davidic dynasty.[103]

When Hananiah is confronted by the sight of Jeremiah in an ox-yoke, Hananiah turns the latter's prophetic sign into a counter-sign by removing the yoke and breaking it apart (Jer 28:10). Stacey points out that it is important to note that Hananiah does not ignore the yoke or mock it; he accepts it as a representation of Babylon's power.[104] Both prophets, therefore, are responding to the current political reality in light of the religious tradition as they understand it and believe it needs to be proclaimed to the Judahite people through the medium of their own personal experience of God.[105] Yet, from a

---

[101] Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 542.
[102] It is not clear from the passage whether Hananiah believes that a rebellion of vassal states will be the effective means by which God will break the yoke of Babylonian power; however, Hananiah is accused of "speaking rebellion against the Lord" (Jer 28:16b) and has likely been a prominent figure in the cadre of Jerusalem prophets who have been encouraging Zedekiah to join in the conspiracy. For a contrasting view, see Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 156.
[103] Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 250-251.
[104] Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 156.
[105] Blenkinsopp, *Prophecy in Israel*, 142.

historical and redactional perspective, Hananiah's act of breaking the yoke is a "symbol without corresponding reality."[106] Though he uses the methods of a true prophet, Hananiah is shown to be a prophet who falsely prophesies peace and who will die within a year of his unfortunate proclamation.

This event from the career of Jeremiah allows a crucial question to be raised, namely, how is it possible to discern between a true and a false prophetic act? The biblical material in Jeremiah 27-28 is of limited use in answering this question, because the narrative redactors have already determined that Jeremiah is a true prophetic figure and that, in this instance, the Lord is not speaking through Hananiah (Jer 28:15). However, the passage does suggest three tests that can be applied when conflicting prophetic claims are made. First, the Deuteronomic mark of true prophecy is brought to bear in reference to Hananiah. When Jeremiah makes the comment that "when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet" (Jer 28:9b), he is paraphrasing an idea expressed in Deuteronomy 18.

> And if you say in your heart, "How may we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?"- when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word which the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously, you need not be afraid of him. (Deut 18:21-22 RSV)

The guiding principle here is the simple rule that true prophetic words and deeds are fulfilled while false prophetic words and deeds do not come to pass.[107]

---

[106] Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 253.

[107] Von Rad is critical of the Deuteronomic criterion by which false prophets might be recognized. Regarding the particular example from Jeremiah 27-28, he argues that it is probable that Hananiah's predictions of imminent salvation coincided with the interests of the national cult; however, correspondence with political interests is not an absolute criterion for questioning prophetic veracity. In his words, "the falsity cannot be seen either in the office itself, or in the words themselves, or in the fallibility of the man who spoke them. It could only be seen by the person who had true insight into Jahweh's intentions for the time, and who, on the basis of this, was obliged to deny that the other had illumination." (Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:210 n. 27.)

Second, Jeremiah invokes a "test of tradition," in that the examples of recognized prophetic figures from the past are compared with the activity of contemporary prophetic figures. He refers to prophets of old whose messages of war, famine, and pestilence were all fulfilled, while others who prophesied peace are still waiting for their words to be proven true.[108] Those categories serve the purpose of connecting Jeremiah's message of warning with the similar messages from recognized prophets of old, while disparaging Hananiah by likening his words to the lies of false prophets who prophesied peace when there is no peace.

Third, Jeremiah shows forbearance when confronted by a rival prophetic claim. Jeremiah's immediate response, when Hananiah breaks the ox-yoke, is to walk away. He does not respond at that time, but waits until a second revelation from the Lord leads him to rebuke Hananiah's false prophecy and pronounce a death sentence against him (Jer 28:12-16). This was an unusual course of action, since Jeremiah has never before been described as being reticent in situations involving the proclamation of divine words.[109]

In addition to these three tests found in Jeremiah 27-28, two additional factors may be considered when distinguishing between true and false prophetic acts. First, the response of the audience can prove helpful in this particular task. In reacting to what prophets say and do, audience decisions might be based on whether the message that is presented is compelling and persuasive, or based on the degree of authority that the community has already invested in a particular figure.[110] Although the authenticity of

---

[108] Wilson identifies Jeremiah with the Ephraimite tradition, while Hananiah is linked with the Jerusalemite theology that focused on the inviolability of Zion. Jeremiah's intent is to align himself with the Mosaic prophets of old and thereby be in a better position to present a divine word from the Lord. See Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 250.
[109] Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 542.
[110] Wilson, *Prophecy and Society*, 250.

prophetic acts is not determined by majority rule, both Deut 18:21-22 and the conflict in Jeremiah 28 rely on the testimony of a witnessing community to help decide who is speaking truthfully and who is mistaken.

Second, it needs to be asked whether the person bringing a divine word is fulfilling the role of prophet, or rather that of a mimetic actor. The latter has been defined as one who is a spokesperson, official or unofficial, for a particular group in society, and whose function is not to shape an audience's beliefs, but merely to reflect them.[111] The distinction is that prophets are recognized as being the "source of or motivating influence" on a group's opinions, while mimetic actors only fulfill the role of articulating the "tenets of the group's common doctrine."[112] In the particular case of Hananiah and Jeremiah, the passage does not describe the audience's response to the two conflicting, prophetic acts; however, the former prophet's message is characterized as expressing the commonly held views of the Jerusalemite priests and prophets, while the latter prophet's message is presented as being distinctive and contrary to the prevailing group sentiment.

In terms of the definition of prophetic acts already presented, the ox-yoke incident in Jeremiah 27-28 is a deliberate and specific act, done by a gifted representative for both communicative and interactive goals. The clash between Jeremiah and Hananiah is particularly helpful, because in this instance two prophetic acts are performed as means of articulating opposing responses to a given crisis. It thereby can serve as a 'test case' for exploring what resources are available when attempting to distinguish between true and false prophetic acts.

---

[111] Friebel's description of this category is dependent on the work of Edwin Black in the area of rhetorical criticism. See Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 151-152.
[112] Ibid.

As is suggested by the quip about "20/20 hindsight," the best resource for distinguishing between true and false prophecy may be the test of time. This is the standard outlined in Deut 18:21-22 and invoked in Jer 28:8-9.[113] It is a standard readily available to those writers and editors who compile their narrative material years after an event has occurred. It is not a resource readily available, however, to contemporaries of prophetic figures who must make immediate decisions about whom to believe when conflicting messages are presented. The reality is that "faithful discernment of God in public process must always be done 'in the middle of things,' before the data are all in."[114]

As noted above, various tests can be applied when attempting to distinguish the veracity of prophetic acts. Yet, lest the obvious be overlooked in this analysis, the ultimate test of the truth or falsity of prophetic acts relates to the actual content of the prophetic message being presented. One scholar suggests that Jeremiah narrows the broad test of Deut 18:22 to a single criterion, namely, whether or not the prophet "encourages in the people a mood of false complacency."[115] In summary, "any prophetic word which seems to ignore the essential moral realism of Yahwehism must be considered to be false unless later vindicated by events."[116]

---

[113] It is also the standard that will be used later in the book of Acts, when Gamaliel suggests that the test of time will prove whether or not the ministry of the Christians was of human origin or of God (Acts 5:38-39).
[114] Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 247.
[115] R. Davidson, "Orthodoxy and the Prophetic Word: A Study in the Relationship Between Jeremiah and Deuteronomy," in *Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible: Selected Studies from Vetus Testamentum*, ed. David Orton (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2000), 8.
[116] Ibid.

D. The Field in Anathoth (Jeremiah 32:1-15)

The prophetic act described in Jeremiah 32 is part of a larger collection of material in chapters 30-33 known as the Book of Consolation.[117] These oracles of hopefulness and restoration, found in Chapters 30, 31, and 33, all appear to have been edited in either exilic or post-exilic times.[118] However, the centerpiece of the entire collection is an account of the purchase of Hanamel's family field in Anathoth. This passage has been the focus of much attention because it presents Jeremiah in a prophetic role atypical for him, namely, as a prophet of hope instead of a prophet of despair. His prophecy that in time "houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" (Jer 32:15b) sounds like a reversal of the earlier words in which the Lord of hosts says, "So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended" (Jer 19:11b). Yet, as several scholars note, these different prophetic messages need not be seen as contradictory. There will be a time of destruction, loss, and exile, yet the Lord "in a radical and incongruous manner [will] restore the nation to normalcy of living."[119]

Chapter 32 opens with a five verse "editorial parenthesis" that establishes a date for the prophetic act and provides background information to explain Jeremiah's

---

[117] This designation given to the material in Chapters 30-33 traces its name to the instructions found in Jer 30:2-3 -"Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you. For the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will restore the fortunes of my people, Israel and Judah, says the Lord, and I will bring them back to the land that I gave to their ancestors and they shall take possession of it." See Ronald Clements, *Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracles to Canon*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, pp. 123-124.

[118] Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 259 n. 72.

[119] Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 328. Clements also argues for an overall consistency to Jeremiah's message while allowing that his message of hope arose at a particular time in his prophetic career, namely, the great crisis brought about by Judah's defeat in 588-587 BCE. Any earlier messages of hope (such as 18:1-12, 24:1-10, and 29:1-32) can possibly be attributed to post-587 BCE revisions of prophecies made earlier in Jeremiah's career. See Clements, *Old Testament Prophecy*, 125-128.

confinement.[120] The act itself is described in the next ten verses as a brief, four-part drama. First, Jeremiah has a presentiment (attributed to the word of the Lord) that his cousin Hanamel would visit him to sell him a plot of land. Second, Hanamel arrives and offers to sell the field in Anathoth. Third, Jeremiah purchases the field for seventeen shekels, being careful to observe all the legal requirements for this transaction.[121] Fourth, Jeremiah makes a brief statement that redefines the purchase of the land as a symbolic action predictive of future land transactions in Anathoth.

Jeremiah's land purchase made during a time of siege and national crisis has been called "the most foolhardy of treasonous acts" (Carroll), and a dangerous act "totally incongruous with the external circumstances" (Friebel).[122] Carroll goes further and doubts that the event has any historicity, choosing instead to consider the material in Chapter 32 as a literary presentation of "*Jeremiah the prophet* behaving in a paradigmatic manner with reference to the community's future" (author's italics).[123] However, this minority opinion goes too far in doubting the scriptural witness. The fact that some of Jeremiah's prior pronouncements had been considered foolhardy and possibly treasonous did not prevent him from issuing his earlier prophetic statements. It would seem possible for any serious misperceptions about his motives for buying the field in Anathoth to be

---

[120] Bright, *Jeremiah*, 236; Jones, *Jeremiah*, 406; Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 301; Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 315.

[121] Questions are sometimes raised as to whether the purchase price of seventeen shekels was fair or not. Since no information is given about the size or quality of the field or of the general purchasing power of money during that crisis period in Judah's history, it is hard to make a determination in this matter. However, since Jeremiah was so punctilious in his observance of the necessary legalities associated with a land transfer, it would be logical to assume that this attention to details carried over into his determination of a fair purchase price. See Bright, *Jeremiah*, 237 and Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 319 n. 542.

[122] Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 621; Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 317. See also Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 301.

[123] Carroll includes in this paradigmatic behavior both Jeremiah's willingness to buy the field and having seventeen shekels on hand during a time of siege in order to finalize the purchase. See Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 622-623.

corrected through a verbal explanation that Jeremiah could have provided once the transaction was complete.[124]

There are two noteworthy details about this hopeful prophetic act. First, it involves a single plot of land that represents an entire region (as well as being a single act that is representative of an entire series of future actions). This type of symbolic representation (one field for an entire region) is similar to categories often used in magical behavior; however, this formal similarity need not be expanded to suggest that Jeremiah's act involved an instrumental causality typically associated with magical acts.[125] Buying the field is basically an event in the form of a simile, suggesting that just as this land transaction occurred, plots of land (including this one) would once again be bought and sold in the future. It is not a miniature of a larger event, like the smashing of the potter's vessel symbolized a coming destruction that would be on a much larger scale; rather it is the first purchase in what would be a long series of purchases occurring during a period of future restoration.[126] Its intent is to tell the people under siege that there will be life after a period of Babylonian exile, both because Babylon is destined to fall from power (Jer 51:59-64) and because God's promise of restoration for the Israelites is trustworthy.[127]

Second, this drama involves the attribution of prophetic qualities to a type of action that might otherwise be considered quite ordinary. Jeremiah's purchase of Hanamel's field is not contrived and artificial, like the prophetic acts associated with the

---

[124] Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 323 n. 552. Stacey is more direct, saying, "There is no reason to reject the Anathoth incident as a later fabrication." (Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 157.)
[125] Fohrer makes the former point; see Fohrer, *Die symbolischen Handlungen*, 44. This stands in contrast to Carroll, who does attribute magical causality to this sign-act; see Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 622, 623.
[126] Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 159; Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 320-321.
[127] Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 302-303.

linen waistcloth, the smashed potter's vessel, or the ox-yoke. In normal times, buying a field of land was a commonplace occurrence. It is the timing and the circumstances surrounding this land transfer that make it so unusual.[128] The narrative does not explain why Hanamel wanted to sell the parcel of land. However, the economic difficulty associated with the Babylonian siege provides a simple enough reason for needing to divest some family property. Hanamel appears to have desired to keep the field's possession within the purview of his extended family. But by buying the land, Jeremiah risks marking himself (in the eyes of his fellow citizens) as a Babylonian traitor, for the land in question was already under the control of the invading army. Only persons who expected to be able to retain ownership of their property under the new regime would reasonably consider purchasing land at that time.[129]

The attention to details surrounding this act of land transfer adds emphasis to the significance of what Jeremiah is doing. In order that there not be any legal question about what he is doing, Jeremiah is precise in making sure that there is a signed and sealed legal deed, a transfer of money verified by scales, proper witnesses to the entire transaction, and a double copy put in an earthenware jar for safekeeping (Jer 32:10-14).[130] Also, Jeremiah's actions are in keeping with the Israelite right of redemption described in Lev 25:25 and Ruth 3-4. But perhaps in order to counter those who would question his political loyalty and motivations in buying this field, Jeremiah insists that the word of the Lord is being proclaimed amid the details of an ordinary act. He traces God's guiding

---

[128] Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 322; Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 158; Clements, *Old Testament Prophecy*, 129.
[129] Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 318.
[130] "A slipshod transaction would imply that the deal was largely meaningless." (Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 158.) See also Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 320.

word both to the presentiment of Hanamel's visit and in the literal offer to redeem the family property (Jer 32:6-8).[131] Jeremiah then explicitly identifies this act as being symbolic of a promise made by the God of Israel that normal life would one day resume in the land.[132] There is no poetic or paradisiacal language used by Jeremiah; there is no mention of hills being made low, rough places being made a plain, or pools of water springing forth in dry places (cf. Isaiah 40-41). His succinct message in v. 15 (and later elaborated upon in vv. 36-44) is that the land that has been overrun and lies in waste will once more be a place of habitation, cultivation, and normal economic transactions.[133]

The prophetic act in Jeremiah 32 is not as distinctive as the other acts already surveyed; however, it is a deliberate deed performed as a specific response to the Babylonian invasion. It is a striking and troubling act, making it both communicative and interactive in nature. It masterfully takes an ordinary event that is likely to be misunderstood, given the unusual circumstances in which it occurs, and turns it into an opportunity for a prophetic proclamation of a message of hope. As Stacey describes it:

> This drama, therefore, is partly an anticipation of many similar acts in the future and partly a declaration of a continuing relationship between Yahweh and his people. The prevailing circumstances do not reveal the whole truth. The prophetic action does.[134]

The combination of the nonverbal act of buying the property in Anathoth and the

---

[131] "Jeremiah understood that the words uttered by Hanamel contained a command from Yahweh which he had to obey." (Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 170.) See also Jones, *Jeremiah*, 408-409; Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 158; Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 301. Carroll stresses that "the divine word does not command Jeremiah to go and buy land but simply informs him that land will be offered for sale to him," however this distinction is unnecessary in light of Jer 32:8b; see Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 622.

[132] Bright, *Jeremiah*, 130. Stacey gives a fuller explanation: "By upholding the law and valuing the land and treating ownership of it with great care, Jeremiah is affirming the continuing significance of the land to Yahweh against all appearances, and affirming, too, that the covenant between Yahweh and Israel, in which the land played so vital a part, was still in being." (Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 159.)

[133] Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:212; Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 302.

[134] Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 159.

subsequent verbal interpretation provided by Jeremiah transformed the witnessing community from being a mere audience for a legal transaction to now being recipients of a hopeful prophetic sign-act.[135]

E. The Stones of Tahpanhes (Jeremiah 43:8-13)

Jeremiah 43 opens with an account of how the prophet's advice against fleeing to Egypt is ignored by the Judahite leaders. Johanan son of Kareah ends up taking Jeremiah, Baruch, and other exiles into the perceived safety of Egypt's realm. Upon arriving in the eastern delta border city of Tahpanhes, the word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah. He is instructed to bury some large stones in the clay pavement in front of Pharaoh's palace in Tahpanhes and then announce to the exiles that King Nebuchadnezzar, acting as God's servant, will conquer Egypt and set his own throne upon the stones buried by Jeremiah.[136]

This prophetic act has similarities with other material found in the book of Jeremiah. The image of foreign powers erecting thrones at the entrance to a city's gates is included in the vision of the boiling pot described in Jer 1:13-15. This particular act, which involves hiding something that has no immediate significance, shares a partial likeness to the burying of the linen waistcloth prophetic act (Jer 13:1-11).[137] It also may be considered an act of mimesis, in that Jeremiah's burial of the stones is intended to be

---

[135] Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 323.

[136] Most commentators point out the textual difficulties present in this passage. It is hard to say precisely where Jeremiah buried the stones in Tahpanhes because of the obscurity of the terms used in v. 9 to describe their location. Also, it is unlikely that a true palace for the pharaoh existed in Tahpanhes. More likely Jeremiah is referring to a government building used to house the pharaoh when he visited the city. Lastly, while the scripture records Jeremiah being told to perform this act, there is no mention of him actually doing it. Yet since the act is to be witnessed by the exiles and accompanied by explanatory words, it is reasonable to assume Jeremiah carried it out. See Bright, *Jeremiah*, 263; Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 352-354; Jones, *Jeremiah*, 479, 480; and Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 166, 167.

[137] Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 400.

imitative of the later workmen who will prepare a pedestal for the throne of the conquering Babylonian king.[138] That would link it with the symbolic act of smashing the potter's vessel (Jer 19:1-13) that imitated the later destruction of the city of Jerusalem. Or the act might be considered inceptive, in that Jeremiah lays the first stone for Nebuchadnezzar's throne room and others will continue the work.[139] That would link the act with the prophetic act of purchasing the field in Anathoth (Jer 32:1-15), which was the first in a series of purchases prophesied to occur during a later time of restoration.

As might be expected, both Fohrer and Carroll consider this burial of stones in Tahpanhes to constitute a magical act. Fohrer associates this action with the ritual burying of cornerstones or marker stones used for sacred buildings and homes.[140] Carroll considers this deed indicative of "ritual magic," in which the destruction of an enemy is brought about through "certain acts accompanied by incantation, curses, and magical utterances."[141] The substance of the actual incantation can be found, according to Carroll, in Jer 43:11; however, the threefold reference to pestilence, captivity, and the sword appears to be only an elaboration of the earlier prediction of death by sword, famine, and pestilence (Jer 42:22; 44:12,13). Brueggemann takes a view in opposition to Carroll by suggesting that it is better to see this prophetic act, not as magic, but as a "poetic, sacramental gesture."[142] His reasoning is as follows:

> It is not helpful, as some interpreters do, to regard such acts as "magic," as though they could only be committed by or only matter to a primitive, precritical mind. Such a reading of a symbolic act reflects a kind of positivism which is unaware of the strange power exercised by such acts . . . Such a [sacramental] gesture makes an assault on presently construed reality, and stakes out a power-laden expectation

---

[138] Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 166.
[139] Ibid., 166-167.
[140] Fohrer, *Die symbolischen Handlungen*, 45.
[141] Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 727.
[142] Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 400.

> for the future that works in the imagination of the observing community. It is the kind of gesture that is characteristically committed by communities of marginality and oppression. Such communities possess no conventional form of power and must rely on sacramental gestures as modes of power which the dominant power cannot resist. Such gestures often take on enormous social power and significance, enough to reshape the community.[143]

The explicit focus of this prophetic act is on the nations of Babylon and Egypt. The exiles are not even mentioned in the passage except in their role as an audience for Jeremiah's act and subsequent speech (Jer 43:9b-10). However, the words of judgment spoken against Egypt will touch the lives of those in the exilic community who sought security within the political and military realm of the pharaoh.[144] Jeremiah is pronouncing through word and deed that there is no place safe for them to flee the growing influence of the Babylonians. King Nebuchadnezzar is identified as the Lord's servant; therefore, Jeremiah insists it is a serious miscalculation to try and follow Yahweh without also accepting the presence of Babylon.[145]

Jeremiah is told to bury some large stones as a prophetic act, signaling how the authority, power, and palatial lifestyle of the Egyptians are soon to be destroyed by the conquering Babylonian army. It is a deliberate and specific act that communicates a provocative message to the Hebrew exiles in Tahpanhes. It is not clear what form of interaction is supposed to take place after this prophetic act occurs. At the very least, it is indicative of Jeremiah continuing to demand utter obedience to Yahweh, even though the

---

[143] Ibid.
[144] Ibid., 402; Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 351.
[145] Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 727; Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 403.

faith community is in exile in Egypt, having put their trust in the Egyptian political forces and now put themselves at risk of being influenced by the syncretistic worship habits of their new home.[146]

F. The Scroll Written Against Babylon (Jeremiah 51:59-64)

For a second time in the book of Jeremiah, the river Euphrates is the setting for a prophetic act. Earlier the banks of the river contained a buried, linen waistcloth (Jer 13:1-13), but now the waters themselves will receive a scroll of judgment against Babylon. Also, for a second time in the book of Jeremiah, the prophet instructs someone else to read aloud words of judgment that he has written upon a scroll. The first time involved Baruch and King Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 36), while the second time involved Baruch's brother, Seraiah and the kingdom of Babylon. This final prophetic act described in the book of Jeremiah is built upon the precedents and foundations established in early chapters of the scriptural text.[147]

In Jeremiah 50-51, various oracles of judgment against Babylon have been collected together. The latter chapter concludes with the prophetic act of throwing a scroll in the Euphrates, an event that some scholars argue should be organized with the material found in Jeremiah 29.[148] The exact contents of the scroll are not reproduced in the final

---

[146] Jones, *Jeremiah*, 477.

[147] It is worth noting, however, that some scholars have questioned the entire passage's historicity. There are textual problems associated with the term used to describe the office held by Seraiah. There are questions about whether Zedekiah ever made a trip to Babylon, and if so, why did he do so. There are concerns about how anyone could publicly read aloud a prophecy of doom against their host nation. And arguments are made to suggest that the prophetic act passage did not originate with the material from chapters 50-51, but was only placed there by a later redactor. See Bright, *Jeremiah*, 212; Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 485; Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 154-155; Jones, *Jeremiah*, 545-546; Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, 282; Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 168-170.

[148] Bright, *Jeremiah*, 204-212; Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 855

pericope of Jeremiah 51, but the common assumption is that it contains the oracles against Babylon found in Jer 50:1-51:58.[149] What is prophesied is the irreversible and utter destruction of the Babylonian empire (Jer 51:60, 62, 64a). Such a message from Jeremiah might seem unexpected, since this same prophet had earlier affirmed the king of Babylon's role as the Lord's "servant" (Jer 43:10) and one whose authority must be respected (Jer 27:6-8).[150] But the community with whom this prophetic act is shared is the exile community living in Babylon. Thus, the broader intent of the prophetic act is to reaffirm that the Lord controls the fate of all nations, whether Babylon or Israel.[151]

What is distinctive about the event described in Jer 51:59-64 is that Jeremiah does not perform it. The prophetic act is carried out by Seraiah, to whom Jeremiah has delegated the authority to perform this act and to explain its meaning. There is no messenger formula preceding these prophetic words; the pericope begins with a word from Jeremiah, not a word from the Lord.[152] However the delegation of responsibility has not diminished the efficacy or authority associated with this particular prophetic act.[153]

It may be inferred from the text that Seraiah performs this deed before an audience of exiles, the same group that had already received a letter from Jeremiah (Jeremiah 29).[154] Yet nothing is said directly to the exile community. They are left to

---

[149] Blenkinsopp, *Prophecy in Israel*, 131-132; Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 156.
[150] Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 168.
[151] Ibid., 165.
[152] Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 168; Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 159.
[153] Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 856.
[154] Jones, *Jeremiah*, 545; Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 163. Von Rad states that it is not necessary to assume Seraiah performed the act before an audience; he simply had to read aloud the message and then throw the scroll into the Euphrates (Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:90). Yet based on the similar incident involving Baruch reading a scroll on Jeremiah's behalf "in the hearing of the people in the Lord's house" (Jer 36:4-6), Friebel makes a strong case for this prophetic act to have been done before an audience. See Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 158, 162.

witness the prophetic act and then decide for themselves how the destruction of Babylon will affect them.[155]

Of all the prophetic acts of Jeremiah thus surveyed, a compelling case can be made that this act of tying a stone to a written prophecy of doom and throwing it into the Euphrates has strong connections to magical practices and behavior. Both Fohrer and Carroll interpret it in this light, and even Stacey recognizes that v. 64 resembles a curse formula.[156] The passage describes activity performed by a delegated actor, done in a secretive manner before an undisclosed audience, and it includes mimetic actions intended to symbolize how Babylon shall sink and never rise again to prominence.

Offering a dissenting voice, Brueggemann does not consider the incident to be magical; rather it is a "freighted political act which serves both to undermine the absolutist claims of Babylon and to invite Jewish hope away from its mesmerizing fear of the empire."[157] Perhaps the strongest argument against seeing this prophetic act as magical behavior comes from Friebel, who insists that "whether an action is 'magical' is determined by the purpose and intent of the performer, not merely by similarity in external form."[158] The cumulative texts attributed to Jeremiah (and the specific pericope of Jer 51:59-64) do not support the existence of a definitive magical understanding that undergirds and constrains the prophetic activity of Jeremiah.

Of the prophetic acts of Jeremiah discussed, this one is the least helpful for a discussion of the nature of nonverbal symbolic acts. It fits the general definition already outlined, in that it is a deliberate act intending to communicate a clear message about the

---

[155] Ibid., 167.
[156] Fohrer, *Die symbolischen Handlungen*, 46-47; Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 855; Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 169.
[157] Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 486.
[158] Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts*, 165.

impending doom of Babylon. However it lacks specificity, in that it is more an elaboration of earlier pronouncements of judgment than it is a deed carried out in response to a particular and immediate crisis. It also lacks a strong interactive quality, in that it is aimed at the kingdom of Babylon yet only witnessed by the exile community of Judah.

Through a consideration of the prophetic activity of Jeremiah, in particular his nonverbal acts of prophetic witness and proclamation, defining characteristics and paradigmatic models can begin to be articulated. This is an important step in the process that will allow a consideration of how similar prophetic acts can occur in modern and contemporary settings. However, before reflection on the biblical material is concluded, it is appropriate to offer a brief survey of the nature of prophetic acts as recorded in the Second Temple material, New Testament scripture and history of the early Christian church.

III. Prophetic Acts in the Second Temple and Early Church Periods

In the previous chapter, it was noted that many scholars close out the period of biblical prophetic activity with the careers of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, and that "long before the turn of the eras, the Jews believed that prophecy as such had ceased in Israel and that the prophetic Spirit had withdrawn."[159] This was not understood to mean that God had severed the covenantal relationship with the people of Israel. Rather, according to rabbinical tradition, it reflected the view that the all-encompassing revelation of the Torah to Moses (and its subsequent programmatic organization by Ezra)

[159] David Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 21. Cf. Psalm 74:9 and 1 Macc 9:27.

no longer required an ongoing prophetic presence.[160] However, there was also an expectation that the spirit of prophecy would again dwell with the people during the time of messianic fulfillment (Joel 2:28-29), which would be preceded by the appearance of the prophet Elijah (Mal 4:5-6).[161]

Even a passing glance at the material dated from after the close of the Hebrew canon would reveal that the title 'prophet' is only given to one person after Malachi.[162] In Josephus' writings, John Hyrcanus (135-104 BCE) is eulogized as someone who had "three of the most desirable things in the world – the government of his nation, and the high priesthood, and the gift of prophecy" (*Wars* 1.2.8). Apart from that reference to Hyrcanus, there is the statement in 1 Maccabees that there is no prophet available in the land to guide the people (1 Macc 4:46; 14:41.).

Christianity emerged in the period following the "turn of the eras," bringing its distinctive message that the biblical predictions about a coming messianic figure had been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. For this community, the long awaited revival of prophetic activity has occurred and the Day of the Lord is near at hand.[163] Building on the prophetic material in the Hebrew scriptures and the revelatory visions found in the book of Daniel, a strong apocalyptic character marks much of early Christian literature.[164] For example, the themes of eschatological dualism and the second coming of the Son of Man appear in several locations in the New Testament canon, such as the "little apocalypse" of

---

[160] Levi Olan, *Prophetic Faith and the Secular Age* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1982), 53, 59.
[161] See also M. H. Shepherd, Jr., "Prophet in the NT" *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 919 and the citations of Test. Levi 8:14 and Test. Benjamin 9:2.
[162] Hill, *New Testament Prophecy*, 22.
[163] Norman Perrin and Dennis Duling, *The New Testament: An Introduction*, 2d ed. (San Diego: HBJ Publishers, 1982), 76. Cf. Acts 2:17-22; 19:6.
[164] This apocalyptic quality might be defined as a biblical theology shaped by a concomitant expectation of imminent supernatural intervention. Olan has commented that apocalyptic revelation "promised divine intervention directly after the period of suffering came to an end." (Olan, *Prophetic Faith*, 54.)

Mark 13 and the Pauline exhortation for vigilance described in 1 Thess 4:13-5:11 and 2 Thessalonians 2. The prophetic quality of this apocalyptic material is explicitly present in Rev 10:8-11, in which John of Patmos is described as being instructed to eat a little scroll given by an angel and then prophesy to the people.

However, von Rad and other scholars argue that a symbiotic relationship between apocalypticism and propheticism does not exist, primarily because of the incompatible views of history posited by adherents of these two approaches.[165] Levi Olan has outlined this distinction nicely:

> The prophets saw the future arising out of the present, the apocalyptists saw the future breaking into the present. One projects history in evolutionary terms, the other expects a supernatural intervention. . . . The prophetic view discloses a divinely guided process of history leading gradually toward the messianic age. The apocalyptist, overwhelmed by the failure and defeat of human effort, embraces the sublime belief that Almighty God will directly and visibly intervene, and make immediately real the kingdom of God.[166]

Both of these themes are prominent in the New Testament material; the rebirth of prophetic activity is an integral part of the Christian witness, and much of that activity involves eschatological, apocalyptic messages. However, in considering the nature of prophetic acts in modern/postmodern times, the language of the apocalypticist is less helpful, because of its understanding of history that is dependent on categories of history-ending, supernatural intervention.

According to the New Testament gospel accounts, John the Baptist is identified as a "prophet of the Most High" (Luke 1:76a) and is considered by many to be Elijah

---

[165] Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:303.

[166] Olan, *Prophetic Faith*, 54-55. See also "In contrast to the apocalyptic visionaries, the pre-exilic prophets are shown the confusions on earth rather than the glories in heaven. Their distinction was to sense the human situation as a divine emergency." (Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2:253.)

returned to earth.[167] Jesus himself commends John as a prophet and claims he is "Elijah who is to come" (Matt 11:9-14). John's washing of others in the waters of the Jordan River qualifies as a symbolic act, in that it involves a physical cleansing while concurrently representing a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4). However, in distinction to the prophetic acts of Jeremiah previously surveyed, John's baptismal acts were not singular events arising from a specific crisis situation.

The primary prophetic figure of the New Testament is Jesus Christ. This designation was given to him because of both the nature of his preaching and teaching and the miracles he performed.[168] Jesus' use of the phrase 'Truly I say to you' (*amēn legō hymin*) can even be interpreted as being equivalent to the Old Testament messenger formula 'Thus says the Lord.'[169] Similarly, Jesus refused to do signs if they would only serve as self-authenticating miraculous deeds; rather, he resembled the Hebrew prophets in only doing sign-acts that point to the present and ongoing activity of God in the world.[170]

The lists of the proposed prophetic acts of Jesus are varied and at times quite lengthy. The seven *semeia* described in the gospel of John could comprise one list.[171] Other possible candidates for prophetic events include the naming of the twelve disciples, the renaming of Simon to Peter, the miraculous draught of fish, the healing of the

---

[167] Shepherd, "Prophet in the NT," 919. Cf. Mark 6:14-15; 11:31-32; Luke 9:7-8. It should be noted, however, that John the Baptist is not the first prophetic figure in the gospels. That honor goes to his father, Zechariah, whose prophecy is recorded in Luke 1:67-79.

[168] For acclamation by others, cf. Matt 21:11,46; Luke 24:19; John 4:19. For direct and indirect self-designation as a prophet, cf. Matt 13:57, Luke 13:33-34 and their gospel parallels. See Shepherd, "Prophet in the NT," 919. Also see Hooker, *Signs of a Prophet*, 16, in which she references a 1930 C.H. Dodd article that listed fifteen features of Jesus' ministry that would have led people to regard him as a prophet.

[169] Hill, *New Testament Prophecy*, 66.

[170] Hooker, *Signs of a Prophet*, 17-18, 31-34.

[171] Raymond Brown identifies them as the changing water to wine (John 2:1-11), curing the official's son (John 4:46-54), curing the paralytic (John 5:1-15), multiplying the loaves (John 6:1-15), walking on the Sea

paralytic, eating with tax collectors and sinners, the feeding of the 5000, the cursing of the fig tree, and the events of Good Friday culminating in the crucifixion. But, for some scholars, the three clearest examples of prophetic acts by Jesus are his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, his cleansing of the temple, and the Last Supper with his disciples.[172] The first act involves messianic claims connected with the riding of an animal never before ridden (as opposed to entering by foot like most pilgrims did), thereby linking the entry into Jerusalem with a sign of God's kingdom now coming in power. The second incident combines an act of protest with a prophetic sign about the coming destruction of Jerusalem. The third act involves taking material objects (bread, wine) and giving them a special meaning by identifying them with something else, similar to the way Jeremiah associated Jerusalem with the potter's vessel. Yet unlike Jeremiah's prophetic act of destruction, Jesus' breaking of the bread at the Last Supper was a sign of community creation, for the broken loaf could now be shared as an expression of the continuing activity of the 'body of Christ' (the church) in the world.[173]

There are other prophetic acts described in the gospels that are done by people who interacted with Jesus. Examples include the encounters of Simeon and Anna with Jesus' family (Luke 2:27-38); the incident when the high priest tears his robe, which mirrors the later rending of the temple veil (Mark 14:63-64); and the woman who anointed Jesus' head with oil, with its overtones of messianic anointing (Mark 14:3-9).[174]

---

of Galilee (John 6:16-21), curing a blind man (John 9), and the raising of Lazarus (John 11). See Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John* , Anchor Bible vol. 29A (New York: Doubleday, 1966), cxxxix.

[172] Hill, *New Testament Prophecy*, 63-64; Hooker, *Signs of a Prophet*, 39-48.

[173] Hooker, *Signs of a Prophet*, 48-54. See also Philip J. Rosato, S.J., "The Prophetic Acts of Jesus, the Sacraments and the Kingdom," in *Gottes Zukunft – Zukunft der Welt*, Hermann Deuser, Gerhard Marcel Martin, Konrad Stock, Michael Welker, eds. (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1986), 59-67.

[174] Ibid., 55-57. See also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's comment: "The unnamed woman who names Jesus with a prophetic sign-action in Mark's gospel is the paradigm for the true disciple. While Peter had confessed, without truly understanding it, 'You are the anointed one,' the woman anointing Jesus

However, the majority of additional material in the New Testament related to prophets and prophetic acts is found in the book of Acts and Paul's epistolary comments on this subject.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul refers to prophecy as a gift of the Spirit and considers those who prophesy to be God-appointed (1 Cor 12:10, 28). It is not something given to all believers, but is considered to be a special endowment ("charism") given to a select few.[175] While this gift is highly rated (1 Cor 14:1), it is both incomplete when not grounded in Christian love and destined to pass away in time (1 Cor 13:2,8).[176]

Within the book of Acts, there are several people referred to as having the gift of prophecy, including Judas and Silas (Acts 15:32), Barnabas and Saul/Paul (Acts 13:1), and the four unmarried daughters of Philip the evangelist (Acts 21:9). There is also a prophet named Agabus who appears twice in the book. He is first introduced announcing a severe famine that would fall upon the region (Acts 11:28). Later he is described as performing a prophetic act on the person of Paul (Acts 21:10-11). It involved taking Paul's leather belt and binding his feet and hands with it, announcing that in the future, Paul would be arrested and bound by the Gentile authorities. However, unlike the prophetic acts from the Hebrew Bible, this symbolic act only involved the future fate of a

---

recognizes clearly that Jesus' Messiahship means suffering and death." (Elisabeth S. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* [New York: Crossroad, 1987], xiv.)

[175] Shepherd, "Prophet in the NT," 919. The Pauline use of the term "prophesy" is different from the broader definition of "prophetic activity" proposed earlier. For example, Paul understands prophecy to be a personal spiritual gift similar to speaking in tongues. It involves disclosing information, such as revealing "the secrets of the unbeliever's heart" (1 Cor 14:25a), rather than revealing the Lord's will for a particular time of crisis. Paul's examples of "prophecy" are not as deliberate, specific, or communally-focused as the examples cited earlier from the book of Jeremiah.

[176] Some scholars argue that the presence of false prophets and the difficulty in discerning true prophetic acts will eventually cause the entire category of behavior to fall into disrepute. See E. E. Ellis "Prophecy in the Early Church," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supplement* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 701.

single person and nowhere was the instrumental activity of God explicitly proclaimed in the prophetic deed.

During roughly this same period (44-70 CE), Josephus records the activity of several prophetic figures, whom he designates as false prophets and imposters. This group includes Theudas, who promised to part the Jordan river; an unnamed Egyptian, who claimed to be able to cause the walls of Jerusalem to collapse; and an unnamed prophet who promised signs of deliverance during the siege of the Jerusalem temple.[177] By contrast, the Didache (circa 70-110 CE) describes an accepted class of prophets, who functioned as itinerant missionaries and traveled to various congregations of the early church. Three chapters of this text (Chapters 11-13) are devoted to discerning true from false prophets, with the latter chiefly recognized by their abuse of the hospitality of unsuspecting churches. The office of prophet itself, however, is still held in high favor.[178]

The primary crisis in the early church related to prophets and prophetic acts involved the Montanist movement in the latter half of the second century. This apocalyptic sect believed it offered a "new prophecy" for the church, based on a fresh dispensation of the Holy Spirit. It also taught that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent and that the town of Pepuza in Phrygia would be the site of the New Jerusalem. The Montanists challenged the growing institutionalization of the Christian church through strict, ascetic practices and an insistence that it offered new words of divine revelation. However, the prophetic messages given by Montanus, Prisca, Maximilla, and

---

[177] Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* (20.5.1; 20.8.6); Hooker, *Signs of a Prophet*, 13-15.
[178] Hill, *New Testament Prophecy*, 186-187; Shepherd, "Prophet in the NT," 920. A similar attitude toward prophets also appears in the later document, *The Shepherd of Hermas* (2 Hermas 11:5-12). See Frank Crane, ed. *The Lost Books of the Bible and the Forgotten Books of Eden* (New York: World Bible Publishers, 1926), 197-269.

others were judged to carry little religious value, and the entire movement was later condemned by the Asiatic Synods and Pope Zephyrinus.[179]

Just as the earlier Jewish view based upon the Hebrew scriptures states that the end of prophecy came during the post-exilic period, the companion opinion based upon the experiences of the early Christian church asserts that "the repudiation of Montanism marks the effective end of prophecy in the Church."[180] Various reasons for this have been offered: the presence of false prophets and imposters undermining the entire institution; the establishment of the canon and of orthodox doctrines; and a stable church hierarchy removing any role for itinerant, "inspired" individuals.[181] In time, many theologians would restrict the spiritual gifts of glossolalia and prophecy to the apostolic age.[182] Yet, as Olan has pointed out, the Christian church thereby created a predicament for itself. By emphasizing the prophetic writings over the Mosaic Torah, and by establishing itself as a group who benefits from a revival of the prophetic spirit last seen in the *nebi'im*, the Christian church struggles with "stressing on the one hand the centrality of biblical prophecy, and on the other hand rejecting the possibility of a new message from God through another prophet."[183] The predicament is potentially resolved through an emphasis on Jesus Christ as the final and complete revelation of God to the world, echoing the sentiment that opens the book of Hebrews: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in

---

[179] Hill, *New Testament Prophecy*, 188-189; Frank L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 934.
[180] Hill, *New Testament Prophecy*, 190.
[181] Ibid., 190-191.
[182] For example, John Calvin (in a discussion of the offices of the church as listed in Ephesians 4) states: "Paul applies the name "prophets" not to all those who were interpreters of God's will, but to those who excelled in a particular revelation [Eph 4:11]. This class either does not exist today or is less commonly seen." (Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.3.4.)
[183] "The Synagogue and the church have no room for a new genuine prophet. The moral of this may be that prophets cannot be at home in an institutionalized religion." (Olan, *Prophetic Faith*, 61-62.) Olan's position

many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds" (Heb 1:1-2).[184]

IV. Conclusion

This brief analysis of some of the prophetic acts recorded in the book of Jeremiah, as well as a passing glance at the general prophetic activity found in the Second Temple, New Testament, and early church periods, brings into relief a dilemma that exists regarding the topic of prophetism in the modern/postmodern world. If the scholarly consensus is that the period of prophetic activity concluded either with the post-exilic era or the apostolic age, is it possible to speak legitimately of prophets and prophetic acts in contemporary times? Who is in a position to designate contemporary events as prophetic acts? And will authentic prophetic acts necessarily be linked to the precedents established in the traditions of the Hebrew scripture, the New Testament, and early church history?

One possible way to begin to address these questions is to begin by first setting forth a definition of what is truly meant by prophetic activity. In this chapter, a general definition has been proposed: *Authentic prophetic acts are deliberate, specific, communicative, and interactive acts performed by representatives of a faith community with the intent of transforming human perceptions of reality and actions in light of the divine nature and will of God.* Other constituent elements of prophetic acts were then

---

seems overstated, since a fair degree of institutionalization existed in the prior religious settings (both Hebraic and early Christian) in which genuine prophetic religion is acknowledged to have been present.

[184] In commenting on this passage, John Calvin states that "God will not speak hereafter as he did before, intermittently through some and through others; nor will he add prophecies to prophecies, or revelations to revelations. Rather, he has so fulfilled all functions of teaching in his Son that we must regard this as the final and eternal testimony from him." (Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.3.7.)

highlighted in the overview of prophetic acts recorded in the book of Jeremiah. Some of those elements include the rhetorical qualities of prophetic acts, the importance of audience reaction and audience involvement, the transformation of ordinary events into prophetic acts, the tension between prophetic figures and mimetic actors, and the ongoing tension between true and false prophets. Subsequent material from the Second Temple, New Testament, and early church periods also emphasized that authentic prophetic activity is not predominantly apocalyptic in character, nor self-authenticating in focus.

I contend that these general characteristics serve well as descriptive categories when considering the possibility of contemporary prophetic acts. Also pertinent are other topics of discussion raised by the scholars surveyed in reference to the New Testament material. There were the observations that prophetic acts are necessary because "prevailing circumstances [often] do not reveal the whole truth" (Stacey) and that prophetic acts are "modes of power which the dominant power cannot resist . . . [and which] take on enormous social power and significance, enough to reshape the community" (Brueggemann). It was suggested that prophetic acts are "dramatic presentations of the truth, an unveiling of what already exists in the divine intention . . . [pointing] beyond itself to the purposes of God which are still to be worked out" (Hooker). And it was argued that "any prophetic word which seems to ignore the essential moral realism of Yahwehism must be considered to be false unless later vindicated by events" (Davidson).

Any discussion that aims to move beyond the general characteristics of possible prophetic acts to reflect on their specific "modes of power," their "unveiling of the divine intention," and their particular relation to the "essential moral realism of Yahwehism"

moves from biblical studies into the areas of theology and ethics. This dissertation will now proceed to consider prophetic activity in light of Paul Tillich's theology of culture (Chapter 3) and William Schweiker's theological ethics (Chapter 4). We will then be in a better position to consider the prior questions about the possibility of contemporary prophetic acts in light of selected events from U.S. history, specifically the twentieth-century Civil Rights movement (Chapter 5).

Chapter 3:
Paul Tillich and the Ongoing Possibility of Prophetism

I. Introduction

In the previous two chapters, the nature of both prophetic figures and prophetic acts was examined. The conclusions in the first chapter acknowledged that biblical prophets were figures arising from within a communal, religious setting. Also, such prophets took an active role in the appropriation and communication of messages reflecting the divine will for a particular human situation. Near the end of that chapter, the assumptions of two authors (Towner, Bryan) regarding the criteria for recognizing authentic prophetic figures were briefly surveyed. In the second chapter, the focus on prophets was narrowed down to the category of non-verbal prophetic acts. A working definition of authentic prophetic acts was proposed and then used as a guide in reference to various scriptural resources. Examples from the prophet Jeremiah were reviewed, and related material found in Second Temple and New Testament literature was briefly considered.

Two important questions must now be addressed. First, how is it possible to speak about prophetic figures and prophetic acts today if so much of our definitional material for this topic is restricted to the canonical period? Second, if the scriptural canon and the

witness of the religious community were primarily what served to authenticate prior prophetic activity, how is it possible to speak about an ethical and hermeneutical grounding for authentic prophetic figures and prophetic acts in the modern and post-modern world? The first question will be addressed in this chapter, considered in relation to the thought and writings of Paul Tillich. The second question will be considered in chapter four in relation to the work of William Schweiker.

The topic of prophetic activity is not a central theme in the writings of Paul Tillich. However, the subject is regularly discussed in relation to his views on major themes like the nature of revelation, the interpretation of history, and the reality of the kingdom of God. In one of his autobiographical reflections, Tillich acknowledges being indebted to the writings of the biblical prophets, especially in their inveighing against injustice.[1] His appreciation of the prophetic spirit is at the heart of his widely known "Protestant Principle."[2] Tillich sees prophetic criticism as a necessary corrective to any tendency toward sacramental conservatism; he understands prophetic voices to be capable of shattering imperfect myths of origin and thus regards them as a constitutive part of any concept of *Heilsgeschichte*.[3] And his views on prophetic activity shape his

---

[1] Tillich made the following comment: "My sympathy for the social problems of the German Revolution has roots in my early childhood which are hard to trace. Perhaps it was a drop of the blood which induced my grandmother to build barricades in the Revolution of 1848, perhaps it was the deep impression of the words of the prophets against injustice and the words of Jesus against the rich; all these were words which I learned by heart in my very early years." (Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, eds., *The Theology of Paul Tillich* [New York: The Macmillan Co., 1956], 12.)

[2] "Consequently, the prophetic spirit must always criticize, attack, and condemn sacred authorities, doctrines, and morals. . . .This protest against itself on the basis of an experience of God's majesty constitutes the Protestant principle." (Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948 and 1957], 226.)

[3] Paul Tillich, *On the Boundary: An Autobiographical Sketch* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), 41,42. Also, Peter Scott, "Prophetic Expectation," *Theology* 99 (Jan-Feb 1996): 36. See also Paul Tillich, *The Socialist Decision* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 18-23.

discussion about the history of religions and the nature of *kairoi* within historical contexts.[4]

In light of these references to the topic of prophets and prophetic activity within the writings of Paul Tillich, it is appropriate to seek possible answers to four general questions through a careful survey of Tillich's theological views. First, what is the nature of the prophetic role? Second, is the expression of this role restricted to past historical periods? Third, how is the prophetic role manifest in word and deed? Fourth, what is the relationship of the manifestations of the prophetic role to both the sacred and secular realms? The goal of this exploration is to propose a tentative judgment about the nature of prophetic activity as it might occur in historical periods outside the era of the canonical writings.

A. The Prophetic Role

In the years during and immediately following the Second World War, Tillich delivered many sermons in the chapel of Union Theological Seminary. Some were collected in the anthology *The Shaking of the Foundations*, which takes its title from a sermon based on scripture passages from Jeremiah and Isaiah. Living in the aftermath of that war's terrible cost and desolation, Tillich describes how some soldiers became prophets after witnessing the destruction unleashed on Europe and Asia. In his words, "the prophetic spirit has not disappeared from the earth."[5] Given that this sentiment is a common one in Tillich's writings, it is fair to begin by asking the following question:

---

[4] See chapter 3 "Kairos" in Tillich, *Protestant Era.* Also, see relevant sections in volume 3 of Tillich's systematic theology. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 3:139-54, 359-90.

[5] Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 7.

What in Tillich's view is the nature of this "prophetic spirit" and what role is fulfilled by prophetic figures within a particular community?

There are two contexts in which Tillich regularly makes reference to the activity of prophets or a prophetic spirit. First, in his discussion of the history of religions, Tillich makes reference to the struggle of biblical prophets (with their exclusive monotheistic claims) against paganism, polytheism, and any idolatrous elevation of finite objects to divine status. Tillich describes this conflict in terms of the boundary that exists between church and society, e.g., in the clash between religious apologetics and paganism draped in "nationalistic garb" after World War I.[6] This same conflict is also present in the monotheistic insistence on the unconditional, ultimate nature of God as opposed to all conditional, "idolatrous consecrations."[7] While it is true that the faith traditions of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity all share this particular theological emphasis, Tillich illustrates this idea almost exclusively through references to the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures.[8]

The second context in which Tillich refers to the prophetic spirit is whenever there is a clash between the "sacred old and the prophetic new," especially if "either side claims ultimacy for itself."[9] In the midst of this tension, a prophetic voice usually arises that, in Tillich's estimation, insists on "calling idolatry idolatry and rejecting it for the sake of that which is really ultimate."[10] The distinction between this prophetic spirit and monotheistic prophetism is that the latter includes the paradoxical criticism of the

---

[6] Paul Tillich, *On The Boundary: An Autobiographical Sketch* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), 61.
[7] Paul Tillich, *My Search for Absolutes* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967), 139.
[8] Near the end of his *Dynamics of Faith*, Tillich does distinguish between the exclusive monotheism of the prophets and the transcendent monotheism of the Christian mystics, thereby drawing on material outside the Hebrew scriptures. See Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 123.
[9] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3: 344.
[10] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 125.

churches by the churches themselves. When this occurs, the churches actually function as priest and prophet to themselves.[11] Tillich characterizes this as a clash between tradition and revolution, between sacramentalism and moral activism, and between the holiness of being and the moral criterion of what "ought to be."[12] He argues that this is at the core of the spirit of Hebrew prophetism, with its emphasis on divine justice, and at the heart of Protestantism, with its focus on protesting all forms of idolatry. The dual foci of being for justice and against idolatry merit further comment.

First, when considering the period before monotheistic faith traditions, Tillich asserts that Western humanity was held in bondage to superstition and false "powers," which he characterizes as being "half religious-half magical, half divine-half demonic, and half abstract-half concrete." In time they were finally conquered by the monotheism of the Hebrew prophets.[13] These prophets proclaimed an absolute God, whose nature was justice. This combination of monotheism and absolute justice enabled Yahweh to emerge as the *universal* God sustaining the world according to a *universal* principle. Tillich would go on to argue that this religious model was not established solely to counter the polytheistic and pagan tendencies of other faith traditions; rather, it was intended to be a broader prophetic principle for challenging similar flaws within the monotheistic faith tradition itself. For example, those who would use the Mosaic law and covenant for goals of injustice often received the full force of prophetic wrath.[14] Or, those who would elevate the worth of sacramental holiness to the point that it had "demonic consequences

---

[11] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:189, 377.
[12] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 67,68; *Systematic Theology*, 3:388.
[13] Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 11.
[14] Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 44.

like the denial of justice" would be challenged by prophetic figures.[15] Tillich believed that the expression of the prophetic spirit in this context changed how holiness itself was understood. No longer was it a quality beyond alternatives of good and evil; now it was redefined by the prophets as being both the morally good (justice) and the logically true.[16]

Second, in the final chapter of *The Protestant Era*, Tillich states emphatically that "the prophetic spirit must always criticize, attack, and condemn sacred authorities, doctrines, and morals."[17] This quality is not simply a characteristic attributed to figures in the Hebrew scriptures. It is also a central principle and guiding force for the Protestant churches that emerged from the Reformation. It is a view based on the belief that every religion runs the risk of idolatry so that all efforts to describe God end up being to some degree a depiction of ourselves.[18] To illustrate this point, Tillich was fond of quoting John Calvin's statement, "The mind of man is a perpetual factory of idols."[19] The idea that Protestantism is compelled to protest "against every power which claims divine character for itself – whether it be church or state, party or leader" is what Tillich identified as the "Protestant Principle."[20]

Tillich's first formal articulation of a "Protestant Principle" appeared in a policy statement written in 1942 for the editorial board of the journal *The Protestant Digest*. The

---

[15] Paul Tillich, *The Future of Religions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 87.
[16] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 15. See also Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:262, where he writes that under the impact of God as Spiritual Presence, "the injustice within the communal justice is conquered."
[17] Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, 226.
[18] "There is no one who does not try to grasp God according to his capacity, and to shape such a God as he can understand on his own level." (Paul Tillich, "The Recovery of the Prophetic Tradition in the Reformation," *Hauptwerke: Theologische Schriften*, vol. 6 [Berlin: De Gruyter Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1992], 323.)
[19] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:11, 8. See Tillich, "The Recovery of the Prophetic Tradition," 323.
[20] Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, 230.

statement contained seven points that present a dialectical worldview that is both affirming and critical of the world and the church. While each statement contained the word 'protest,' only the first one was explicitly identified as being 'prophetic.' Yet, in many ways, the first one was the primary tenet from which the remaining six points were all derived: "Protestantism affirms the absolute majesty of God alone and raises prophetic protest against every human claim, ecclesiastical or secular, to absolute truth and authority."[21]

To summarize briefly, Tillich suggests that the nature of the prophetic spirit is particularly active in two related contexts: it is the word and deed offered in support of authentic monotheistic worship (as opposed to religious conceptions of polytheism and paganism), and it is the word and deed proclaimed critically within monotheistic religious traditions against any tendencies toward idolatry, injustice, or false senses of ultimacy. Having said that, two other characteristics of prophetism should be mentioned. First, for Tillich, the prophetic spirit adds to a given situation a quality of "newness" and transcendence.[22] There are various ways to characterize this. It can be seen as the addition of a teleological dimension to the ontological dimension, a question of "Whither?" alongside the question of "Whence?" It can be described as a movement beyond what is and what has been into the larger realm of what ought to be with its infinitely new possibilities. It can be the prophetic expectation of "something that does not exist but

---

[21] Ronald H. Stone, *Paul Tillich's Radical Social Thought* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 99. Tillich later provided a succinct description of the Protestant Principle in his 1963 Earl Lectures. He said "it is the principle in which the church in its essence, or true being, protests against the church in its existence. From this it follows [that] there must always be two things in church life: the duality of tradition and reformation. If either disappears completely, then Christianity is gone." (Paul Tillich, *The Irrelevance and Relevance of the Christian Message* [Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1996], 49.)

[22] In his discussion of the Spiritual Presence in his *Systematic Theology*, Tillich commented that when "God spoke to the prophets, [God] did not give them new words or new facts, but [God] put the facts

should exist," or of "something unconditionally new that transcends what is new and what is old" in order to bring about a "new heaven and a new earth."[23] This activity of the prophetic spirit has the quality of hopefulness and expectancy, even as it routinely speaks with a voice of criticism.

Second, there is a correlative interaction between church and society inherent in the prophetic process. Using Tillich's distinctive terminology, it can be said that the negativities of society are challenged by bearers of the prophetic spirit, who act in the name of the Spiritual Presence.[24] Conversely, voices from society may offer criticism of "holy injustice" or "saintly inhumanity" present within the church community – a kind of "reverse prophetism" on behalf of God's true definitions of justice and humanity.[25] In both situations, neither the church nor society will remain the same as they were before. Tillich insists that there may be a weakening or hardening in those qualities that merit prophetic criticism, yet in either case they have been changed.[26] This correlative and transformative quality is an important part of how Tillich understands prophetic activity.

---

known to them in the light of ultimate meaning and instructed them to speak out of this situation in the language they knew." (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:127.)

[23] Tillich, *The Socialist Decision*, 4, 20. Also, James Luther Adams, Wilhelm Pauck, Roger Lincoln Shinn, eds., *The Thought of Paul Tillich* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 47. This transcendent, teleological quality should not be too easily linked with the idea of progress. To interpret history in terms of the God of prophetic religion, who has promised a particular future and who will establish a heavenly kingdom, does include a "vision of progress toward the future." However, Tillich was always concerned about how the idea of progress has been corrupted by utopianism, so he would stress that "where there is freedom to contradict fulfillment, there the rule of progress is broken." See Tillich's essay "The Decline and Validity of the Idea of Progress" in *The Future of Religions*, 64-79.

[24] The success of such attacks may be limited; nonetheless, "the fact that the society is put under judgment and must react positively or negatively to the judgment is in itself a success." (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:213.) In order to clarify what is meant by the phrase "Spiritual Presence," the following definition from Tillich's third volume of his *Systematic Theology* should be offered: "The Spirit of God is the presence of the Divine Life within creaturely life. The Divine Spirit is 'God present.' The Spirit of God is not a separated being. Therefore one can speak of 'Spiritual Presence' in order to give the symbol [of unambiguous life] its full meaning." (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:107.)

[25] Ibid., 3:214.

[26] Ibid., 3:213.

Contextual and qualitative descriptions are helpful for grasping the boundaries of Tillich's thought in relation to the nature and activity of prophetism. However, it is important to move the discussion into the context of corporate life and ask: What is the role fulfilled by prophetic figures within a particular community? An epigrammatic response to that question might be to call prophets the "instruments of God in the actualization of [God's] judgment against mankind."[27] But for a sustained discussion on the nature of the prophetic role, it is necessary to consider Tillich's discussions on revelation and the Spiritual Presence found respectively in the first and third volumes of his *Systematic Theology.*

Tillich succinctly defines revelation as being "the manifestation of what concerns us ultimately." Going one step further, he states that revelation is "invariably revelation for someone in a concrete situation of concern," and it usually grasps a group through the medium of an individual.[28] Tillich asserts that there is no such thing as "general revelation" (*Offenbarung ueberhaupt*), because revelation is only authentic if it is received and recognized by persons (or groups) as being correlative to their specific situation.

Bearing that in mind, it should also be noted that the revelatory prophetic role is not linked to personal qualities of historical importance or social greatness. Individuals or groups per se are not mediums of revelation. Rather, in Tillich's view, "it is the

---

[27] Tillich, "The Experience of the Holy," *The Shaking of the Foundations*, 91.

[28] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:110,111. Later in that same section, Tillich states that the "prophet is the mediator of revelation for the group which follows him – often after it first has rejected him." (Ibid., 1:128.) Also, in the sermon previously cited, Tillich remarks that "a prophet does not forget the social group to which he belongs, and its unclean character which he cannot lose. Consequently, the prophetic ecstasy, as opposed to the mystical ecstasy, is never an end in itself, but rather the means of receiving the divine commands which are to be preached to the people." (Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, 90.)

revelatory constellation into which they enter under special conditions that makes them revelatory." He says:

> If history points beyond itself in a correlation of ecstasy and sign-event, revelation occurs. If groups of persons become transparent for the ground of being and meaning, revelation occurs. But its occurrence cannot be foreseen or derived from the qualities of persons, groups, and events. It is historical, social, and personal destiny. It stands under the "directing creativity" of the divine life.[29]

Although more could be said about this understanding of revelation, it should be noted how Tillich has expanded the category of prophetic activity beyond the limits of those explicitly identified as prophets by their own religious community. Tillich's general definition is this:

> Revelation can occur through every personality which is transparent for the ground of being. The prophet, although a medium of historical revelation, does not exclude other personal mediums of revelation. The priest who administers the sphere of the holy, the saint who embodies holiness himself, the ordinary believer who is grasped by the divine Spirit, can be mediums of revelation for others and for a whole group.[30]

Instead of attempting to pinpoint the nature of prophetic charisma or ecstasy, Tillich approaches this topic from the other side of the equation. He suggests that there is nothing formulaic about becoming "transparent for the ground of being." Rather, one should begin with the premise that we are never left alone by God and that the Spiritual Presence is potentially active in every moment and every situation. Then, based on the prophetism described in the Hebrew scriptures, the prophetic role is seen as something initiated by the Spiritual Presence, which encounters individuals and "sublimate[s] them into states of mind which transcend their ordinary possibilities and which are not

---

[29] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:120. See also Maguire's comment that "prophetism is the understanding of history as permeated with divine concern." (Daniel Maguire, *The Moral Core of Judaism and Christianity: Reclaiming the Revolution* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993], 169.)
[30] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:121.

produced by their toil or good will. The Spirit grasps them and drives them to the heights of prophetic power."[31] So in place of any vocabulary of passivity or ecstatic possession, Tillich seems to lean in this discussion toward the language of sublimation and transcendence. And in distinction to any inclination toward spiritual isolationism and individualism, Tillich is quick to argue that all prophetic activity of the Spiritual Presence occurs in social settings for the benefit of the larger community.[32] Based on that, a description of the role of the prophetic figure can be found in the following statement by Tillich: "He who pronounces the divine Word is, as is the keenest analyst of society, aware of the social situation of his time, but he sees it ecstatically under the impact of the Spiritual Presence in the light of eternity."[33]

B. The Prophetic *Kairoi*

Since so much of the material concerning prophets comes from the Hebrew scriptures, it has already been mentioned that some scholars choose to restrict prophetic activity to the period broadly associated with the monarchy of Israel. Those who hold

---

[31] Ibid., 3:140, 143. This idea is similar to what Calvin refers to as "the testimony of the divine Spirit," and to which Tillich refers in one of his articles. See Tillich, "The Recovery of the Prophetic Tradition," 346. Tillich's discussion of revelation and prophetic activity arising from being grasped by the Spiritual Presence appears at opposite ends of his three volume *Systematic Theology*. The twelve years separating the composition of this material complicates making a summary of how these two categories are related. It is my contention that Tillich would see prophetic activity as a subset under the larger category of revelation.

[32] "The divine Spirit's invasion of the human spirit does not occur in isolated individuals but in social groups, since all the functions of the human spirit – moral self-integration, cultural self-creation, and religious self-transcendence – are conditioned by the social context of the ego-thou encounter." (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:139.) A similar idea is expressed in relation to the manifestation of the New Being, which is Tillich's general term for the ontological and theological resolution of the gap between human being's essential and existential nature and Tillich's specific term for the event of the Jesus as the Christ. "Bearers of this process [of the actualization of the New Being] are historical groups, such as families, nations, and the church; individuals bear it only in relation to historical groups." (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 2:88). See also 3:312 ("The individual is a bearer of history only in relation to a history-bearing group.") and the quotations cited in n. 29 above.

[33] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:119.

such a view might possibly give an affirmative answer to the following question: Is the expression of the prophetic role only to be found in past historical periods, thereby ruling out any contemporary manifestations of prophetic activity? Paul Tillich, however, belongs to the group of scholars who would give the opposite answer to that question, arguing that the period of prophetic activity did not end in the sixth century BCE, and that the prophetic spirit is still active in our world today. In the previously cited section of the third volume of his *Systematic Theology*, Tillich writes, "Mankind is never left alone. The Spiritual Presence acts upon it in every moment and breaks into it in some great moments, which are the historical *kairoi.*"[34]

There are four useful sources to which one can turn to appreciate Tillich's thoughts on the subject of *kairos*. First, there is an essay that he wrote for *Die Tat*, first published in 1922 (when Tillich was a *Privatdozent* at the University of Berlin) and later reprinted in *The Protestant Era*. The second is his 1950 article "The Recovery of the Prophetic Tradition in the Reformation." Third, there are Tillich's comments on this subject as found in the 1963 volume of his *Systematic Theology*. Fourth, James Luther Adams' essay on "Tillich's Interpretation of History," found in the collection *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, offers some excellent insights from among the secondary source material.[35]

---

[34] Ibid., 3:140.

[35] See Paul Tillich, "Kairos" in *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 32-51; "The Recovery of the Prophetic Tradition in the Reformation," *Hauptwerke: Theologische Schriften* vol. 6 (Berlin: de Gruyter Evang. Verlag, 1992), 319-361; *Systematic Theology* vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 369-374; and James Luther Adams, "Tillich's Interpretation of History" in Charles Kegley & Robert Bretall, eds. *The Theology of Paul Tillich* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1956), 330-355.

When the word *kairos* appears in scripture, it often indicates the "fullness of time" or a fixed time or season.[36] When Tillich speaks about *kairos*, he uses the term in a more specific sense referring to any moment in which "the eternal breaks into the temporal."[37] The biblical and Tillichian views come together in the idea that the appearance of Jesus as the Christ represented the unique and definitive kairotic moment in time, establishing a center point between "the two infinities of physical time, the infinity of the past and the infinity of the future."[38] For those who acknowledge the unique and particular *kairos* revealed in Jesus as the Christ, a teleological perspective (e.g., the belief that all things are so constructed and ordered that they serve the purpose of God's will) now shapes how history itself is to be understood, namely, as something given substance and meaning by the divine. For Tillich, this perspective challenges humankind's focus on the autonomous and finite by insisting that the eternal invades the temporal in order to bring about crisis moments that are transformational and directed toward what is unconditional.[39]

An appreciation of *kairos* and the "fullness of time" appear throughout Tillich's work. Eduard Heimann has suggested that Tillich's distinctive understanding of *kairos* was strongly influenced by his experiences after World War I in trying to work for lasting

---

[36] See Mark 1:15a ("And saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near'") and 2 Cor 6:2b ("See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!").

[37] Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, 45, *The Religious Situation*, 176, and *Systematic Theology* 2:164. See also "But 'kairotic' moments appear at every turning point in history in which the eternal judges and transforms the temporal; for these moments the term *kairos* is used in its general sense." (James Luther Adams, "Tillich's Interpretation of History" in Kegley and Bretall, *Theology of Paul Tillich*, 306.)

[38] Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, 28.

[39] Ibid., 45. In the next section of this particular article on "Kairos," Tillich outlines three categories for this concept. "Kairos in its *unique* and universal sense is, for Christian faith, the appearing of Jesus as the Christ. Kairos in its *general* and special sense for the philosopher of history is every turning-point in history in which the eternal judges and transforms the temporal. Kairos in its *special* sense, as decisive for our present situation, is the coming of a new theonomy on the soil of a secularized and emptied autonomous culture." (Ibid., 46-47.)

peace and justice in his war-torn homeland.[40] Tillich himself describes how his views on "religious socialism" and a "theology of crisis" led him to have hopeful expectations that the kairotic moment between the wars would lead to a new movement of cooperation penetrating East and West alike.[41] James Luther Adams adds the philosophical insight that the term *kairos* became a central concept for Tillich in his struggles against the ongoing temptation of Utopianism to denigrate the "creative significance of the present moment."[42] For the purposes of this project, what should be stressed is that all of Tillich's understandings about the "fullness of time" were fundamentally guided by his particular views on the prophetic vocation. For example, in his response to the essays collected by Kegley and Bretall, Tillich expounds on his kairotic interpretation of history:

> The *kairos*-doctrine was conceived in a situation in which it was necessary to find a way between socialist utopianism and Lutheran transcendentalism. The "present moment" had to be interpreted as the bearer of a demand and a promise, both breaking from eternity into time. And the "present moment" was taken as the concrete moment in history, in which we, in a special period, in a special country, experienced promise and demand. I believe that this is just the way in which the prophets in Israel and the prophetic minds in the Church, and sometimes outside the Church, experienced their special historical vocation. That is what we did in the years after the First World War, and this experience was expressed in the symbol of the *kairos*.[43]

Therefore, Tillich's own life experiences in the first part of the twentieth century would argue against a presupposition that prophets can only be found in past historical periods. To further substantiate this conclusion, it is worth noting that Tillich often makes reference to the Protestant Reformation as a period imbued with the prophetic spirit and a

---

[40] Kegley and Bretall, *Theology of Paul Tillich*, 313.
[41] Tillich goes on to acknowledge how this expectation would be "twice shaken, first by the victory of fascism and then by the situation after its military defeat." (Paul Tillich, "Beyond Religious Socialism," *The Christian Century* 66, no. 24 [15 June 1949]: 732.)
[42] Kegley and Bretall, *Theology of Paul Tillich*, 305.
[43] Ibid., 345.

sense of the fullness of time. The title of his 1950 article states explicitly that the Reformation exhibited a level of prophetic activism that needs to be recaptured in contemporary society. Tillich identified a prophetic spirit in Calvin's attacks against the idolatry and distortions of the priestly religion and in Luther's articulation of the idea of God's absolute power.[44] The thesis of his article, though, argues that whenever the prophetic spirit of periods like the Reformation comes to be embodied in institutional forms and historical realities, it will manifest decidedly anti-prophetic traits. These include tendencies toward idolatry and legalism. Tillich considers this characteristic to be indicative of an inherent yet ultimately necessary "dynamic tension."[45]

What is important for the topic at hand is that Tillich's consideration of the prophetic spirit active in the Protestant Reformation also leads him to concede the possibility of other prophetic activity occurring in various periods of history. To substantiate this conclusion, Tillich made the following statement as part of a discussion about the creation of a new and living community: "This is the point in which the Reformation (*and perhaps every prophetic movement, every rediscovery of the prophetic spirit*) [italics mine] is in the greatest difficulty."[46] Tillich's emphasis may be on the difficulty of surmounting the tension between the priestly and prophetic elements in the

---

[44] Tillich, "The Recovery of the Prophetic Tradition," 322-25. Later in the same article, Tillich suggests that for the reformers, "the real enemy is idealism, for they felt that man is by nature idealistic about himself, producing ideologies and therefore idols." (Ibid., 332.)

[45] "The tension between the prophetic principle and its realization is an everlasting problem of religion, for it is rooted in the basic relation of God and man – that God, who infinitely transcends man, becomes manifest to man and appears among men. When men receive him, they inescapably make an idol of him, and produce idols day by day; and the prophetic spirit must rise again and must protest." (Ibid., 352.)

[46] Ibid., 341. In a similar vein, near the conclusion of a brief overview of Judaism, Tillich made the following point: "It is not strange therefore that certain groups in humanistic, cultured Judaism readily and easily abandoned their religious heritage and transferred their loyalty to capitalist society. Yet *the spirit of ancient prophecy continues to be effective* even in religiously liberal circles" (italics mine). (Tillich, *Religious Situation*, 189.)

church, but his theological system certainly seems to assume the possibility of prophetic activity as a continuing reality.[47]

In Tillich's final public lecture can be found a succinct summation of this position. Under the heading "The Significance of the History of Religions," Tillich begins with the premise that the universal basis of religion is "the experience of the Holy within the finite."[48] The involvement of finite and particular items in this experience of the Holy is a mark of the sacramental character of religion. However, the sacramental quality of religion risks both idolatry and demonization, so it is routinely challenged by mysticism (particular realities are denied for the ultimate reality) and prophetism (particular realities criticized by broader ethical and moral imperatives). Tillich insists that these three elements in the experience of the Holy (sacramentalism, mysticism, prophetism) are always present and, when unified, constitute the "inner aim of the history of religions."[49]

It is this idea of the ever-present quality of prophetism in religions that allows for the possibility of prophetic activity in various periods of history – a possibility that Tillich associates with the barrier-breaking activity of *kairos* moments. He explicitly associates prophetism with aspects of both the "church latent and manifest" while adding the proviso that recognition of these kairotic, prophetic moments is "not a matter of detached observation but of involved experience."[50] Tillich insists that any experience of

---

[47] When Tillich hypothesizes about the focus of prophetic activity today, he describes it this way: "If we could understand again what the prophetic witness of the Reformation meant, it would be not a fight with ecclesiasticism so much as a fight with the well-balanced secularism of today, which also has religious elements in it." (Tillich, "The Recovery of the Prophetic Tradition," 330.)
[48] Tillich, *Future of Religions*, 86.
[49] Ibid., 85, 88. Tillich goes on to name this unity of sacramental, mystical, and prophetic religious elements as "The Religion of the Concrete Spirit."
[50] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:370-71.

a prophetic *kairos* should be tested against the central *kairos* event, which he defines as the appearance of the center of history, i.e., Jesus as the Christ. This testing is needed to prevent error or distortion from undermining what is being manifest concerning the in-breaking Spiritual Presence and the ultimate fulfillment in the Kingdom of God. This is also important because, by definition, *kairoi* are rare occurrences and there may be long periods of time in which "the presence of the Kingdom of God as determining history is not always given."[51] Yet even in those moments without *kairoi*, which Tillich likened to a "sacred void" of waiting, the theological presupposition accepting the ongoing possibility of transformative prophetic activity remains firmly in place.

C. Prophetic Speech and Prophetic Acts

Having considered the possibility of prophetic activity in various stages of human history, it is also important to ask about the characteristic forms by which prophetism is expressed. In light of the discussion of prophetic acts in Chapter Two, the following question should now be raised: According to Tillich, how is the prophetic role manifest in word and deed?[52]

In a sermon he preached from texts found in Jeremiah, Tillich offered this summary of the prophetic word of God:

---

[51] Ibid., 3:371-72.

[52] Already in this dissertation, the terminology for prophetic activity and prophetic acts has been briefly surveyed. In Tillich's section on revelation, found in the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, he offers a short discussion of "sign-events." (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:115-118) However, he uses that term in relation to "signs" (*semeion*), as distinct from "miracles," and not in reference to specific prophetic acts. Aspects of this discussion are helpful for the present chapter, such as his comments that the "manifestation of the mystery of being does not destroy the structure of being in which it becomes manifest" (1:115) or that a sign-event is "an event which points to the mystery of being, expressing its relation to us in a definite way" (1:117). Yet the focus of his discussion about sign-events is "The Reality of Revelation," and as such is not as helpful for the present work as are other aspects of Tillich's writing highlighted here.

> The many words from the Lord which are recorded in the Old Testament have the same quality. They are not promises of an omnipotent ruler replacing political or military strength. They are not lessons handed down by an omniscient teacher, replacing sound judgments. They are not advices of a heavenly counselor, replacing intelligent human counsel. But they are manifestations of something ultimate breaking into our existence with all its preliminary concerns and insights. They do not add something to our situation, but they add a dimension to the dimension in which we ordinarily live. The word from the Lord is the word which speaks out of the depth of our situation. It is, one could say, the deepest meaning of the situation, of every situation which comes to us in such words.[53]

Thus Tillich suggests that the setting in which the prophetic role is manifest in word and deed is our *own* situation, namely, the dynamics and dimensions that mark ordinary life. So an initial characteristic of prophetism is that it is grounded in the realities of human experience.

A second characteristic of prophetic activity is that it is heavily reliant on language. In Tillich's description of the self-actualization of human life, he posits that language is "fundamental for all cultural functions."[54] It is the means by which all manner of culture is created, including that which fits under the categories of religion and ethics. It is the tool for expressing humanity's encounter with reality and, (from Tillich's perspective) more importantly, with our ultimate concern. When the latter is the focus of ordinary language, it is changed into religious language; however, this broad category can be broken down into subgroups that include, among others, narrative, poetic, liturgical, and prophetic speech.[55] Thus Tillich would argue for the reliance of prophetic activity on 'cultural language' in general and 'religious language' in particular.

---

[53] Paul Tillich, "Is There Any Word from the Lord?" in *The New Being* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 117-18.

[54] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:58. See also "All functions of man's spiritual life are based on man's power to speak vocally or silently." (Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 47.)

[55] "Religious language is ordinary language, changed under the power of what it expresses, the ultimate of being and meaning. . . . It becomes holy for those to whom it expresses their ultimate concern from generation to generation." (Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 47-48.)

Third, religious language (including prophetic language and religious symbols), in Tillich's view, takes form within the context of religious groups and cannot be fully understood outside of these groups.[56] This may appear to be a complex thesis, but it arises from some basic presumptions. It begins with the following idea:

> God's purpose in history is to save individuals, not as individuals, but as participants in his kingdom, in the unity of all beings under God. Therefore, the message of the prophets and apostles is given to groups. They are called individually, but their message is destined for the nation to which they belong or for the church of which they are members.[57]

Tillich then goes the next step by describing the revelatory process associated with prophetic activity as being inherently relational. It involves experiences "in which an ultimate concern grasps the human mind and creates a community in which this concern expresses itself in symbols of action, imagination and thought."[58] It also involves religious symbols that should not be seen as "stones falling from heaven," but rather as constructs that have grown out of a particular social matrix and "have their roots in the totality of human experience including local surroundings."[59] In such moments when the Spiritual Presence "imposes itself on an individual or a group," language is elevated and transformed, making a "few words become great words."[60]

---

[56] Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 24. In the section on "Faith and Community" in this particular text, Tillich speaks about the "community of believers," as opposed to the more general term "religious groups" I have used. In his writings, Tillich goes into significant detail about religious communities and "communities of the New Being," but to explicate the distinguishing characteristics of those groups would go beyond the primary focus of this chapter. For now it is only necessary to acknowledge the broader communal context out of which religious (e.g., prophetic) language emerges without defining the distinctive features of the religious community. See also Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 117; *Theology of Culture*, 204-6; and *Systematic Theology*, 1:148-49.

[57] Tillich, *Biblical Religion*, 47.

[58] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 78.

[59] Tillich, *The Future of Religions*, 93. See also "Man symbolizes that which is his ultimate concern in terms taken from his own being." (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:243.)

[60] Ibid., 3:254.

Before these ideas can be further developed, it is important to review Tillich's distinctive understanding of the difference between symbols and signs. This topic is concisely discussed near the end of the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, in the third chapter of his *Dynamics of Faith*, and in the essay on "The Nature of Religious Language" found in his *Theology of Culture*. Tillich believes that "while the sign bears no necessary relation to that to which it points, the symbol participates in the reality of that for which it stands."[61] Both signs and symbols point beyond themselves to something else. Tillich illustrates this point with the example of a stop sign at a street corner. The red octagon and the stopping of cars are connected through an agreed upon social convention (e.g., traffic laws); however, there is no essential connection between the stop sign and the braking traffic. There is no necessary linkage or inherent relation between these two objects.[62] By contrast, an American flag is not a sign, but a symbol, because it has come to participate in the self-identity and authority of the nation it represents. Treating the flag with disrespect or attacking the flag itself is considered equivalent to dishonorable and blasphemous behavior toward the nation it symbolizes.[63] The symbol of the flag points beyond itself while also being inherently related to that toward which it points.

However, an important nuance still needs to be mentioned. The symbol, while participating in that to which it points, is not the same as that to which it points. This is a crucial distinction, especially for the category of religious symbols. Tillich insists that

---

[61] Ibid., 1:239.
[62] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 41-42.
[63] Ibid., 42. In the essay in *Theology of Culture*, Tillich also mentions the example of a king, namely, someone who is "a symbol of the power of the group of which he is the king and on the other hand, he who exercises partly (never fully, of course) this power." (Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 55.)

every statement about God, except one, is necessarily a symbolic statement. (For Tillich, the one "non-symbolic" statement is the assertion that "God is being-itself.")[64] Almost all statements about the infinite are derived from aspects of finite reality and couched in language arising from experiences of finite reality. By necessity, then, what is ultimately true transcends the realm of finite reality infinitely and cannot be expressed directly and properly by any statement.[65] Thus, all such statements are symbolic statements, with their meanings being simultaneously affirmed (in pointing beyond itself toward God) and negated (in that God far surpasses any finite symbolic statement).[66]

Tillich has a high regard for symbols, believing strongly that one should never say "only a symbol."[67] That is because religious symbols open up "levels of reality which otherwise are hidden and cannot be grasped in any other way."[68] For Tillich, the closest parallel to this process is seen in relation to artistic symbols (such as in poetry, music, and the visual arts), with their expressive qualities active on various levels of experience and meaning. However, he goes a step further and associates this "opening up" process both with the religious symbol and with the soul that encounters the religious symbol. Tillich makes a correlation between the deeper levels of reality and the interior levels in the

---

[64] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:238-39.
[65] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 44.
[66] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:239. The discussion about biblical symbols found in the first volume of Tillich's *Systematic Theology* obviously raised numerous questions among his readers, because he devoted a lengthy paragraph to this topic in his introduction to the second volume. Part of what he said includes the following: "A religious symbol uses the material of ordinary experience in speaking of God, but in such a way that the ordinary meaning of the material used is both affirmed and denied. Every religious symbol negates itself in its literal meaning, but it affirms itself in its self-transcending meaning." (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 2:9.) In another text, Tillich writes: "Symbols in the Bible . . . indicate their symbolic character by making manifest the presence of God and at the same time the incomprehensibility of God." (Tillich, "Recovery of the Prophetic Tradition," 322.)
[67] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 45.
[68] Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 56; *Dynamics of Faith*, 42.

human soul, and suggests that religious symbols reveal something about both.[69] In effect, religious symbols evoke an experience of the dimension of fundamental depth, "the level of being itself" present in the human soul.[70]

Two other qualities of symbols remain to be mentioned, which relate to the earlier topic of the relational nature of prophetic language and religious symbols. From Tillich's perspective, symbols cannot be invented or intentionally created. In his words, they "grow out of the individual or collective unconscious and cannot function without being accepted by the unconscious dimension of our being."[71] As a consequence of this, they come to be and at some point may cease to be. When the communal situation is ripe for them, the symbols grow and flourish; when the social situation and needs change and evolve, they wither and die.[72] Tillich succinctly captures these ideas in his *Theology of Culture*:

> "Out of what womb are symbols born?" Out of the womb which is usually called today the "group unconscious" or "collective unconscious," or whatever you want to call it – out of a group which acknowledges, in this thing, this word, this flag,

---

[69] "So every symbol is two-edged. It opens up reality and it opens up the soul." (Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 56-57.) See "[R]evealing symbols [are] symbols which reveal immediately, which open up something of God and something of the soul at the same time, so that they can meet." (Tillich, "Recovery of the Prophetic Tradition," 349.) See also "Religious symbols are double-edged. They are directed toward the infinite which they symbolize *and* toward the finite through which they symbolize it. They force the infinite down to finitude and the finite up to infinity. They open up the divine for the human and the human for the divine." (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:240.)

[70] Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 59. In the third volume of his *Systematic Theology*, Tillich explicitly describes sacraments as being religious symbols because "the sacramental materials are intrinsically related to what they express; they have inherent qualities (water, fire, oil, bread, wine) which make them adequate to their symbolic function and irreplaceable. . . . [A sacramental symbol] participates in the power of what it symbolizes, and therefore, it can be a medium of the Spirit." (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:123.) Yet for Tillich, there is a symbol superior even to the sacraments. He writes, "If Christianity claims to have a truth superior to any other truth in its symbolism, then it is the symbol of the cross in which this is expressed, the cross of the Christ." (Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 67.)

[71] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 43.

[72] Ibid. Later, in the same source, Tillich comments: "But the life of symbols is limited. The relation of man to the ultimate undergoes changes. Contents of ultimate concern vanish or are replaced by others. . . Symbols which for a certain period, or in a certain place, expressed truth of faith for a certain group now only remind of the faith of the past. They have lost their truth, and it is an open question whether dead symbols can be revived. . . .[But] one never can say a symbol is definitely dead if it is still accepted. It may be dormant but capable of being reawakened." (Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 96-97.)

> or whatever it may be, its own being. It is not invented intentionally; and even if somebody would try to invent a symbol, as sometimes happens, then it becomes a symbol only if the unconscious of a group says "yes" to it. It means that something is opened up by it in the sense which I have just described. Now this implies further that in the moment in which this inner situation of the human group to a symbol has ceased to exist, then the symbol dies. The symbol does not "say" anything any more.[73]

It is in this sense that Tillich would argue that religious symbolic language (including prophetic words and deeds) arises out of the context of group consciousness and cannot be fully understood outside of these groups.

In answer to our question about how the prophetic role is manifest in word and deed, Tillich's work has suggested three general characteristics. Prophetism can be considered a communicative, interactive process that is 1) grounded in the reality of human experiences, 2) reliant upon human language, and 3) predicated upon the social contexts of communities who, in turn, formulate and express themselves through diverse religious symbols. Bearing in mind our working definition of prophetic acts (*Deliberate, specific, communicative, and interactive acts performed by representatives of a faith community with the intent of transforming human perceptions of reality and actions in light of the divine nature and will of God*), Tillich's insights do not require adjusting the substance of what has been proposed. However, his theology provides a means to understand more fully what is meant by the phrase "performed by representatives of a faith community."

One last detail remains to be mentioned. In his section on "The Divine Spirit," found in the third volume of his *Systematic Theology*, Tillich describes how the activity of the Spiritual Presence is part of the creation of, and communication by, religious

---

[73] Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 58.

symbols. He cites an example of this in the distinction between ordinary symbols, with their linguistic basis grounded upon the cleavage between subject and object, and "Spirit-created" religious symbols, which are able to overcome both this split and the ambiguities of language itself.[74] For Tillich, the "Word of God is the Spirit-determined human word" that overcomes the ambiguities of language and of cognition.[75] This is possible because all religious knowledge is "knowledge of something particular in the light of the eternal and of the eternal in the light of something particular."[76]

It is Tillich's understanding of "Spirit-determined human words" and "the eternal [being revealed] in the light of something particular" that has the most in common with the nature of prophetic acts as discussed in Chapter Two. It can be claimed that these qualities are present in Jeremiah's act of breaking the potter's flask and his subsequent words of prophetic judgment, in his symbolic act of wearing the ox-yokes before the king, or in his purchase of the field of Anathoth as a prophetic act pointing to God's future plans for the entire region. Likewise, it can be claimed that the same quality was present in Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, in his cleansing of the temple, or at his Last Supper with his disciples. In one of Tillich's sermons, he commented that when a human "listens to the prophetic word, when he hears of the everlasting God and

---

[74] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:254. Earlier in this same paragraph, Tillich states: "The subject-object cleavage underlies language. . . . [N]o language is possible without the subject-object cleavage and that language is continually brought to self-defeat by this very cleavage. In theonomy, language is fragmentarily liberated from the bondage to the subject-object scheme. It reaches moments in which it becomes a bearer of the Spirit expressing the union of him who speaks with that of which he speaks in an act of linguistic self-transcendence." (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:253.)

[75] Ibid. At the end of this same paragraph, Tillich states "one could say that the ambiguities of the human word are conquered by that human word which becomes divine Word." (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:255.)

[76] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:255. One brief reference from Tillich's autobiographical reflections merits mention at this point. The historical Reformation discussion over *finitum non capax infiniti* has ramifications for Tillich's views in relation to the question of how the infinite is potentially present in the finite. Given the tension between "extra Calvinisticum" and "infra Lutheranum," Tillich acknowledges his

of the greatness of His power and the mystery of His acts, a response is awakened in the depth of his soul; the infinite within him is touched."[77] In another sermon, he offers this intriguing commentary:

> On this road you will meet the liberating truth in many forms except in one form: you never will meet it in the form of propositions which you can learn or write down and take home. But you may encounter it in one sentence of a book or of a conversation or of a lecture, or even of a sermon. This sentence is not the truth, but it may open you up for the truth and it may liberate you from the bondage to opinions and prejudices and conventions. Suddenly, true reality appears like the brightness of lightning in a formerly dark place. Or, slowly, true reality appears like a landscape when the fog becomes thinner and thinner and finally disappears. New darknesses, new fogs will fall upon you; but you have experienced, at least once, the truth and the freedom given by the truth.[78]

It can be argued that it is this liberating encounter with the truth of religious symbols in general, or authentic prophetic acts in particular, that brings an awareness of "true reality"(Tillich's phrase) based upon a "knowledge of something particular in the light of the eternal and of the eternal in the light of something particular."

D. Prophetic Realms

In the preceding sections, something akin to the reporters' old questions have been put to Paul Tillich in reference to his views on the topic of prophetic activity. Material has been presented about "Who?" (prophetic role), "When?" (prophetic *kairoi*), and "What?" (prophetic words and deeds); now what remains is the question "Where?" (prophetic realms). After considering prophetism from the perspectives of functionality, temporality, and practicality, it is appropriate to review this topic in terms of spatiality.

---

preference for the latter theological position; however the topic is not fleshed out in detail. See Tillich, *My Search for Absolutes*, 26-27 and Kegley and Bretall, *Theology of Paul Tillich*, 5.

[77] Tillich, "We Live in Two Orders" in *The Shaking of the Foundations*, 22-23.

[78] Tillich, "What is Truth?" in *The New Being*, 72-73.

Speaking generally, this involves the question of where one might encounter a prophetic interplay of the infinite realm and our finite reality. Speaking more specifically, it raises the question about whether a prophet is always located in a formal church community, or whether a prophet could possibly arise from outside an institutional church setting as a member of the "latent" church community (Tillich's terminology).

Once again, Tillich's sermons are a good starting point for tackling this question about the spatial quality of prophetic activity. In the title sermon from his collection *The Shaking of the Foundations*, Tillich writes: "On the boundaries of the finite the infinite becomes visible."[79] As another example, there is the sermon "Is There Any Word from the Lord?" in which Tillich speaks about how manifestations of the ultimate break into our finite existence and uncover a new dimension in relation to the ordinary dimension in which we live. Throughout that sermon, Tillich tries to articulate the spatial quality of this in-breaking of the divine. He describes it in the following ways: moments "in which the eternal made itself felt to us through the abundance or greatness or beauty of the temporal;" moments which are "the eternal cutting into the temporal;" moments in which "the eternal shines through" or the divine "breaks vertically into it."[80] It is difficult to express such abstract categories, even partially, using the vocabulary of spatiality. Tillich recognizes this fact and concludes the sermon by making the same point in a different way. He writes:

> It is not easy to keep oneself open for a word from the Lord. And nobody can make it easier for us by giving us the direction in which to listen. No fixed place can be named, either in our religious tradition or in our cultural creations, or in the depth of our souls. But for this very reason, no place is excluded from communicating to us a word from the Lord. It is always present and tries always

[79] Tillich, *Shaking of the Foundations*, 9.
[80] Tillich, "Is There Any Word from the Lord?" in *The New Being*, 120-21.

> to be perceived by us. It is like the air, surrounding us, omnipresent, trying to enter every empty space. It is the empty space in our souls into which it tries to enter here and now.[81]

By insisting that "no place is excluded from communicating" a word from the Lord, Tillich is making a profound statement about the dimension of depth present in all finite reality and about (what he considers) the false dichotomy that would divide the world into realms of the sacred and the secular.[82]

The groundwork for these views is set forth in the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*. In his discussion of the "mediums of revelation," Tillich states: "There is no reality, thing, or event which cannot become a bearer of the mystery of being and enter into a revelatory correlation." Therefore, revelation can occur through any personality (prophet, priest, saint, or someone else) which is "transparent for the ground of being."[83] This same transparency of personality is also present, for Tillich, in revelatory language. As he puts it, "something shines (more precisely, sounds) through ordinary language which is the self-manifestation of the depth of being and meaning."[84]

Later in that same volume, the spatial location of this "depth of being and meaning" is associated with the "sphere of the gods" or the sacred "sphere of holiness." Yet this holy realm is not so much a place to be explored as it is a quality (of that which concerns us ultimately) to be experienced. In making this point, Tillich challenges the common usage of two pairs of supposed opposites, namely, profane/holy and secular/

---

[81] Ibid., 123-24.

[82] Similar ideas are expressed in his sermon "I Am Doing a New Thing," in which Tillich draws on several passages from the Old and New Testaments and suggests that the "new things" of which the prophets spoke bear upon themselves the marks of their eternal origin. He says, the "really new is that which has in itself eternal power and eternal light. New things arise in every moment, at every place. . . . It is new, really new, in the degree to which it is beyond old and new, in the degree to which it is eternal." (Tillich, *Shaking the Foundations*, 184-85.)

[83] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:118, 121.

[84] Ibid., 1:124.

sacred. He provides the standard definitions for the terms profane and secular: profane, "to be before the doors of the sanctuary," and secular, "belonging to the world."[85] Then he argues that the strongly negative connotations associated with these words should be replaced with more neutral definitions. In his opinion, the categories of the profane and secular does not refer to things that are necessarily unclean and unworthy; rather, they refer to that which functions in the realm of preliminary concerns and thereby lacks ultimacy and holiness.[86]

Tillich is anxious to stress that a fundamental relationship exists between the secular and the holy. His reasoning is as follows. First, "there are no persons, scriptures, communities, institutions, or actions that are holy in themselves, nor are there any that are profane in themselves."[87] Holiness is a quality given to an act or sacrament when it functions as an authentic "symbol of the Unconditioned which alone is holy and which is, and is not, in all things at the same time."[88] Second, holiness requires so-called holy "objects" in order to become actualized. The holy "can be expressed only through the secular, for it is through the finite alone that the infinite can express itself."[89] That is the reason why a sharp dichotomy between secular and sacred is inappropriate from Tillich's perspective. As he says, the "sacred does not lie beside the secular, but it is its depths . . . [and] creative ground."[90]

---

[85] Tillich, *The Future of Religions*, 89 and *Systematic Theology*, 1:217-18. 'Profane' comes from a variant of the Latin *profanus* (*pro-*, before + *fanum*, temple). Secular (from the Latin *saecularis* or *saeculum*, generation, age), etymologically speaking, has more to do with temporality than spatiality, since the primary distinction being made is between a focus on the temporal, immediate age in contrast to the eternal, spiritual age.
[86] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:215, 218.
[87] Tillich, *On the Boundary*, 71.
[88] Ibid., 73.
[89] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:218.
[90] Tillich, *The Future of Religions*, 82. Kelton Cobb points out how Tillich's theology of culture is reliant upon Troeltsch's earlier work, especially in terms of the idea of theonomy, the religious *a priori*, and the

Tillich characterizes this perspective as being particularly Protestant, diverging from what he considers to be a Catholic tendency to separate the sacred and profane.[91] James Luther Adams sees this as indicative of Tillich's "Protestant Principle," namely, the idea that "the sacred sphere is not nearer to the Ultimate than the secular sphere."[92] It is this latter idea that returns this discussion back to the prior question of location. Earlier, the question was asked, Where might one encounter a prophetic interplay of the infinite realm and our finite reality? It seems one possible response from Tillich would be, Just about anywhere. There is an essential unity between the holy and the secular, despite their existential separation.[93] This unity can be characterized as a dimension of depth present in all reality, as well as an inherent potentiality in all things and all places to become expressive of an ultimate concern. Thus Tillich's position would argue against any tendency to reject summarily prophetic words that arise from sources some might consider unholy, profane, or secular.

The prior conclusion can be amplified through a consideration of Tillich's understanding of the activity of the Spiritual Presence outside the organized church.

"subterranean movement of the divine life in human life." (Kelton Cobb, "Reconsidering the Status of Popular Culture in Tillich's Theology of Culture," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63 [Spring 1995]: 54.)

[91] " . . . If Protestantism has any ruling passion it is toward the 'profane.' Such an idea rejects in principle the Catholic separation of the sacred and the profane." (Tillich, *On the Boundary*, 71.) See also, "Protestantism denies in principle the cleavage between a sacred and a profane sphere. Since to it God alone is holy in himself and since no church, no doctrine, no saint, no institution, and no rite is holy in itself, every man and every thing and every group is profane in itself and is sacred only in so far as it becomes a symbol of the divine holiness." (Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, 229-30.) Tillich also refers to this as an "existential concept of religion" in which the gap between the sacred and secular disappears, since the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern "cannot be restricted to a special realm." (Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 41.) Tillich's position suffers from having emerged prior to the advances of Vatican II, and antecedent to recent engagement of Protestants with the Catholic theological work on the sacramental potency of all reality.

[92] Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, eds., *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, rev. ed. (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1982), 349.

[93] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:221.

When Tillich uses the terms "latent" and "manifest" church, he does so in light of the following definitions: the former refers to a Spiritual Community active *before* an encounter with the central revelation of Jesus as the Christ and the latter refers to a similar (or the same) group *after* such an encounter. In the third volume of his *Systematic Theology*, Tillich writes:

> The concrete occasion for the distinction between the latent and the manifest church comes with the encounter of groups outside the organized churches who show the power of the New Being in an impressive way. There are youth alliances, friendship groups, educational, artistic, and political movements, and, even more obviously, individuals without any visible relation to each other in whom the Spiritual Presence's impact is felt, although they are indifferent or hostile to all overt expressions of religion. They do not belong to a church, but they are not excluded from the Spiritual Community. . . . Certainly the churches are not excluded from the Spiritual Community, but neither are their secular opponents. The churches represent the Spiritual Community in a manifest religious self-expression, whereas the others represent the Spiritual Community in secular latency.[94]

The roots of this theological perspective can be traced to Tillich's first published lecture, entitled "*Über die Idee einer Theologie der Kultur*" (1919). In that work, Tillich sought to describe a theology that is not bound to religious principles as they have been embodied and passed on by the organized church, since the "Unconditioned" is anxiously waiting "to be rediscovered outside the boundaries of the ecclesial community."[95] Eighteen years later, at an ecumenical conference in Oxford, Tillich would comment that "often God speaks to the church more directly from outside the church, through those who are enemies of religion and Christianity, than within the church, through those who are official representatives of the churches."[96]

---

[94] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:153.
[95] Cobb, "Reconsidering the Status of Popular Culture," 55.
[96] Paul Tillich, *Perspectives on 19th and 20th Century Protestant Theology*, ed. Carl Braaten (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); quoted in Cobb, "Reconsidering the Status of Popular Culture," 55.

It is in light of these opinions that the category of prophetic activity once more can be brought to bear on the current discussion. If Tillich is correct in assuming that there is an essential unity between the holy and the secular, and that the Spiritual Presence is active in latent and manifest aspects of the Spiritual Community, then it would be fair to associate the prophetic spirit with certain aspects of both the holy and the secular, and to assume that it may be expressed in both the latent and manifest Spiritual Community. For Tillich, this broad understanding of the prophetic role means that the church challenges all that is demonic and idolatrous in society and within itself. And it does so by listening to prophetic voices from within and outside itself.[97] This is part of Tillich's dialectical interpretation of history, which insists that prophetic voices will always be moved by the Spiritual Presence to critique the religious and non-religious spheres of life. For God is related to both of these realms, and it is God, not religion, that is ultimately sovereign.[98]

---

[97] "In its prophetic role the Church is the guardian who reveals dynamic structures in society and undercuts their demonic power by revealing them, even within the Church itself. In so doing the Church listens to prophetic voices outside itself, judging both the culture and the Church in so far as it is a part of the culture. We have referred to such prophetic voices in our culture. Most of them are not active members of the manifest Church. But perhaps one could call them participants of a "latent Church," a Church in which the ultimate concern which drives the manifest Church is hidden under cultural forms and deformations. Sometimes this latent Church comes into the open. Then the manifest Church should recognize in these voices what its own spirit should be and accept them even if they appear hostile to the Church." (Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 50-51.)

[98] Kegley and Bretall, *The Theology of Paul Tillich* (1956), 296. It is also interesting to note how Tillich viewed the prophetic role as the driving historical power striving to attain a synthesis between the sacred and secular realms. He writes, "The powers struggling with one another in history can be given different names, according to the perspective from which they are viewed: demonic-*divine*-human, sacramental-*prophetic*-secular, heteronomous-*theonomous*-autonomous. Each middle term represents the synthesis of the other two, the one toward which history is always extending itself – sometimes creatively, sometimes

II. Conclusion

At the onset of this chapter, it was recognized that a reliance on canonical material, especially from the Hebrew scriptures, shapes almost all discussions about prophetic figures and prophetic activity. A question was then posed about whether this scriptural dependence necessarily precludes any consideration of prophetism occurring in historical periods subsequent to the biblical era. In attempting to respond to this broad query, four secondary questions were asked, and the theological writings of Paul Tillich were surveyed in order to offer possible responses. The results of this survey can now be summarized.

First, Tillich often spoke about the historic manifestations of a "prophetic spirit," so a question was asked seeking to clarify the nature of such manifestations, the contexts in which they might appear, and whether they could be characterized as individual or communal occurrences. In considering Tillich's discussion of prophetism, it is clear that he associates a quality of transcendence with expressions of the prophetic spirit; that is, the prophetic spirit points beyond the immediate word or deed toward the ultimate concern (God or divine realm) as well as it evokes an awareness of a dimension of depth (i.e., pointing toward the ground of being) that is active in the immediate situation.[99] Possible contexts for such prophetic activity are situations involving idolatry, again, as Tillich broadly defines it, those situations in which anything limited by the conditions of

---

destructively, never completely fulfilled, but always driven by the transcendent power of the anticipated fulfillment." (Tillich, *On the Boundary*, 81.)

[99] This reference to God touches on a complex subject for Tillich, and, in particular, his distinctive vocabulary for the divine realm that is not facilely interchangeable with traditional formulations within the Christian theological tradition. Tillich proposes that "God" is the answer to the question implied in our finitude (1:211). God's being is "being-itself," a power that resists nonbeing and is beyond the tension between essential and existential being (1:235-36). For Tillich, to try and say more about God is to move necessarily into language that is inherently symbolic and correlative. Yet at this point, further ontological comments about the nature and being of God would extend beyond the explicit focus of this dissertation.

finite existence makes claims more in keeping with ultimate, essential being.[100] And while nothing is a priori excluded from being a potential medium of revelatory prophetism, the bearers of this prophetic spirit tend to be individuals active within a larger communal group.

The preceding conclusion is borne out when the when the prior discussion about the prophetic acts of Jeremiah is recalled. For example, the "spoiled waistcloth" act served as a vivid dramatization of the broken relationship with God, which had arisen because the people of Judah were serving a false god or a flawed "ultimate concern" in their daily lives. Similarly, the "broken flask" incident issued a vivid warning against continued acts of explicit religious idolatry. And in every case surveyed in the preceding chapter, there was an individual speaking (and acting) prophetically before a larger group, whether that is to be defined as the immediate audience members, or the people who were later told about the prophetism, or even the subsequent generations who continue to read about these acts within the canonical scripture.

Second, a question was asked concerning whether prophetism is limited to certain historical periods, or could occur at any moment. Tillich argues that the Spiritual Presence is unambiguously active in every moment, although experiences of this activity may be fragmentary and ambiguous in their manifestation.[101] Certain moments, however, are full of the prophetic spirit and become *kairos* moments within human history. For Tillich, the possibility of prophetism and *kairos* moments, when the eternal breaks into the temporal, is both ongoing and certain.

---

[100] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:128.

[101] This comes from being drawn into the ambiguous realities of life, as well as being anticipatory in nature. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:140.

Third, a question was raised about the forms used to embody prophetic activity. Tillich's own theology of culture would ground prophetism in the realities of human experience, including ordinary language and communication by culturally-shaped symbols. He goes further, however, by describing the dual nature of religious symbols as both pointing to and participating in that which they represent. These symbols become the means by which knowledge of the eternal can come through something particular. Yet, it is also worth noting that the social contexts that shape and help define religious symbols are constantly changing, so there comes a time when some symbols may cease to communicate and pass away.

Fourth, it was asked whether there are limitations to the location in which prophetism may occur. For Tillich, the God who is God of all history is also God of all places. This means that the quality of eternal, unconditional being that is not limited by finite temporality is similar to the quality of omnipresence that is not restricted by finite spatiality. This is why Tillich rejects a strict dichotomy of sacred and secular, or profane and holy, when considering the nature of our human realm. Similarly, he is quick to challenge any absolute distinction between the organized church and the rest of human society. Tillich uses the language of "latent" and "manifest" church to denote differences in how people relate to the central manifestation of Jesus as the Christ. But he would neither restrict the activity of the Spiritual Presence, nor limit the spirit of prophetism, solely to the latter group.

This particular sentiment was strongly expressed by Tillich near the end of his life, when he gave the Earl Lectures at the Pacific School of Religion in 1963. In the closing section of the final lecture, Tillich reiterated his belief that the divine ground

"shines through every creative human act."[102] He then goes on to offer the following challenge:

> Hear this one important warning! Never consider the secular realm Godless just because it does not speak of God. To speak of a realm of divine creation and providence as Godless *is* Godless. It denies God's power over the world. It would force God to confine Godself to religion and church. Thus I come to the end of what I would say. I have asked and do ask all of you who are responsible for the church and Christianity – ministers, laity, those on the boundary, even those outside – to *fight an uphill battle!* In this battle the decision will be made whether Christianity's essential and universal relevance will again become an actual relevance for our period of history.[103]

The reason Tillich characterizes this as an "uphill battle" can be traced to many causes, e.g., the inherent tension between essential and existential being, the ever-present temptation to idolatry and profanization contained in every religious institution, the incongruity between unambiguous revelation and the ambiguous reception of all revelation, to name a few.[104] In light of the current discussion about prophetism, a similar tension exists in the difficulty of deciding whether prophetic acts are authentic or not. Even if it is conceded that prophetism can occur in various periods of history and arise out of diverse communities, a lingering question remains to be answered: How can one know if a prophetic act is truly authentic and ethically trustworthy? An attempt to address this concern and comment on its ethical implications is the substance of Chapter Four, with the topic considered in reference to the theological ethics and writings of William Schweiker.

---

[102] Tillich, *The Irrelevance and Relevance of the Christian Message*, 62.
[103] Ibid., 62-63.
[104] "In so far as religion is based on revelation it is unambiguous; in so far as it receives revelation it is ambiguous." (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:104.)

Chapter 4:
William Schweiker and the Theological Ethics of Prophetic Acts

I. Introductory Comments on Methodology

A common logical progression moves from general themes to more specific, related topics. However, in this dissertation, the logical movement has basically flowed in the opposite direction. From an initial question about the nature of prophetism, subsequent chapters have expanded on this theme and explored successively broader aspects of the topic area. The opening chapter sought to delineate characteristics of prophets and prophetic activity. The primary source material for this process was restricted to the biblical canon, in particular the Hebrew scriptures. The second chapter focused on prophetic activity, especially the symbolic acts of the prophet Jeremiah; however, it moved on to consider briefly similar activity as described in the New Testament, Second Temple, and early church periods. By beginning to explore material from outside the biblical canon, it prepared the way for Chapter Three with its examination of the social context out of which prophetism emerges. The work of Paul Tillich was surveyed to provide clarification concerning questions about the nature of prophetic roles, the temporal location of prophetic activity, the characteristics of

prophetic deeds, and the possibility of encountering prophets in both the sacred and secular realms of human society.

In the current chapter, the focus will expand once more, as prophetism is considered from the perspective of theological hermeneutics. The nature of prophetism will be compared with the qualities of human understanding itself, in order to explore whether the interpretive process already described in relation to prophetic acts mimics the more general hermeneutical process that occurs in relation to human understanding and which prompts ethical action. For this discussion, the writings of theological ethicist William Schweiker will be surveyed as primary source material.[1] The more specific goal of this chapter is to consider how Schweiker's system of theological ethics and hermeneutical realism help one envision the possibility of authentic prophetic acts occurring in modern and post-modern social contexts.

II. Theological Ethics & The Work of William Schweiker

Although the phrase "theological ethics" has already appeared in this dissertation, it has yet to be formally defined. It is a phrase that makes reference both to a process and to the participants in the process. It suggests that ethical reflection on moral activity will be guided by theology (process) and that the agents involved in such reflection will do so in response to their understanding of the relational nature of the God of Christian

[1] William Schweiker is a professor of theological ethics at the University of Chicago Divinity School and College. He served prior academic appointments at Mundelein College (Chicago) and the School of Religion at the University of Iowa before joining the faculty in 1989 at the Divinity School at the University of Chicago.

theology (participants). Theological ethics is also Schweiker's preferred descriptive category for much of his work, so it merits elaboration at the onset of this chapter.[2]

Ethics from a Christian perspective begins with the presupposition that our most basic relationship is a relation to the divine and that "human beings live, move, and have their being in God."[3] Trusting that the realm of the divine is also the source of what is good and of value for all human life, the purpose of theological ethics is "to help us see our lives in the light of the divine and to see how this insight directs and invigorates what we ought to be and to do."[4] This definition of theological ethics includes both descriptive and interpretive elements. It describes human beings as agents capable of making decisions about how to direct their lives, mindful of how they exist within a larger context that includes the divine realm, and it recognizes that humans are continually interpreting the events occurring around them, in order to decide how to exercise their agential freedom in an ethical and moral fashion.

Because of the interpretive element inherent in systems of theological ethics, the discussion in this chapter will delve into both moral inquiry and hermeneutics. However, given this dissertation's overall focus on religious symbols and prophetic acts, some initial comments on the latter subject are appropriate now. First, any effort to speak

---

[2] It is interesting to note that Tillich was not in favor of using the phrase "theological ethics," believing that such a category must be "consciously prejudiced ethics." His logic is as follows: "Theological ethics as an independent theological discipline must be rejected, although every theological statement has ethical implications (as it has ontological presuppositions). If theological ethics (or philosophy of religion) is dealt with academically in a separate course, this is merely a matter of expediency and should not become a matter of principle. Otherwise, an intolerable dualism between philosophical and theological ethics is set up, leading logically to the schizophrenic position of 'double truth.'" (Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967], 3:266-67.)

[3] William Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 214.

[4] William Schweiker, *Power, Value, and Conviction: Theological Ethics in the Postmodern Age* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998), 70. Schweiker identifies this goal as part of Christian moral philosophy (based on the approach of H. Richard Niebuhr); however he insists that the focus of concern is not simply

comprehensively about life and the contexts of moral activity must be dependent on symbolic and metaphorical language, since none of us has a perception of the "whole" of existence.[5] If this effort is meant to be theological in nature, then the subject matter will necessarily involve interpretations of Christian symbols and metaphors.

Second, this interpretive process not only must provide insights into the symbolic resources of Christianity; it should also provide a self-critical perspective that allows for the evaluation and transformation of the religious symbols and faith traditions.[6] This is part of the value of a hermeneutical approach to theological ethics. In such an approach, an account of human meaning-making through symbols and symbolic actions necessarily includes a willingness to explore the social and historical forces that cause distortions in our religious and ethical traditions.[7] In this way, we both acknowledge that our moral self-awareness arises from a higher source and admit that this insight comes to us from within the immediate context of our limited, meaning-making reality. Schweiker insists that this model takes seriously the role played by our self-understanding as agents whenever we are engaged in meaning-making activity, as well as positing that in

---

the Christian life but human moral existence in general. See William Schweiker, "Power and the Agency of God," *Theology Today* 52 (July 1995): 204-5.

[5] Schweiker, "Power and the Agency of God," 212.

[6] William Schweiker, "Tradition and Criticism: Problems and Approaches in the History of Ethics," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1992): 300-1. In a later article, Schweiker argues that this hermeneutical approach provides a needed corrective to the more generalized "theology of culture" of Paul Tillich. He claims that Tillich's insight that much of culture contains a religious dimension did not specify how particular religious symbols, practices, and ideas actually operate within social contexts. This omission could lead to a marked secularization of theological reflection. See William Schweiker, "Having @ Toomuch.com: Property, Possession and the Theology of Culture," *Criterion* 39 (Spring/Summer 2000): 27.

[7] In his article "Understanding Moral Meanings," Schweiker presents three basic presuppositions that are helpful in grasping what he understands by the phrase "human meaning-making." First, Schweiker claims that human life takes place within a space of meaning and worth. Second, human beings have the capacity to be self-interpreting. Third, following a tradition traceable to Augustine, Calvin, Wesley, and others, hermeneutical and theological reflection involve efforts to discover within the dynamics of experience or consciousness itself the connection between knowledge of self and knowledge of God. See William Schweiker, "Understanding Moral Meanings: On Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Ethics," in

precisely such meaning-making actions, the divine is encountered.[8] The explicit connection between Schweiker's work and the thesis of this dissertation occurs in the consideration of prophetic acts as being a specific category of "meaning-making actions."

At the outset, it is fair to acknowledge that Schweiker's responsibility ethics and theological hermeneutics do not explicitly discuss the category of prophetic acts. His primary focus is explicating a particular imperative of responsibility, which can be summarized as the challenge to recognize that in all actions and relations, human beings are to respect and enhance the integrity of life before God.[9] The last two words in that imperative of responsibility are crucial for Schweiker, because he believes it is only through an awareness of the divine grounding of moral values that human power is no longer considered to be axiologically basic and the sole content of the good.[10] Recognizing God as the source of all value and power transvalues human power, removing it from a position of false primacy and allowing for human beings to be guided by a theologically-grounded ethics of responsibility.

While it is true that Schweiker does not speak about prophetic acts per se, he does write on occasion about prophets and biblical prophetism in general. Because Schweiker is an ethicist, concerned with issues of justice, and he works from a definite biblical tradition, this topic is not entirely foreign to him. In his writings, the most commonly

---

Christian Ethics: Problems and Prospects, ed. Lisa Sowle Cahill and James F. Childress (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1996), 77-78.

[8] Ibid., 90.

[9] Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 2, 33, 125, 208; *Power, Value, and Conviction*, 71; "Power and the Agency of God," 220-21. See also William Schweiker, "The Church as an Academy of Justice: Moral Responsibility in the World of Mammon" in *The Local Church in a Global Era: Reflections for a New Century*, eds. Max L. Stackhouse, Tim Dearborn, and Scott Paeth (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 27.

[10] Schweiker, *Power, Value, and Conviction*, 146. See "Power and the Agency of God", 220 in which Schweiker comments "Human power is not definitive of value, even if diverse forms of power are the origin of value. Human power is exercised for good or ill within a horizon of value symbolized through the

quoted scriptural material, other than from the book of Genesis (creation account, story of the Tower of Babel, Abraham saga), is a verse from the prophet Micah ("What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Micah 6:8b).[11] For Schweiker, the call to be people of justice that serve a God who is the source of universal justice is a prophetic call thoroughly in keeping with the Hebrew scriptures' model of prophetism.[12]

In a sermon preached on Isa 6:1-8, Schweiker suggests that all Christians have been called "to apprehend the divine presence within the essential structures of life, within our political lives, our economic existence, family and friends."[13] He has also written about how prophetic voices can be heard in challenges to cultic systems of false authority, in sermons calling for God's covenant to be honored today, in pronouncements (like Habakkuk's) that recognize evil in the world, and in cries (like Hosea's) that call humans to lives of collective responsibility.[14] The category of prophetic discourse is a crucial one for Schweiker. For him, it encompasses the challenge of existing as social

---

divine and mediated by different forms of discourse." See also Schweiker, "Understanding Moral Meanings," 87.

[11] William Schweiker, "Against the Skeptics: On Getting Real About Morality," *Criterion* 36 (Winter 1997): 24, 30. See also William Schweiker, "Power and the Agency of God," 218-19; *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 46, 133; *Mimetic Reflections: A Study in Hermeneutics, Theology, and Ethics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), 240.

[12] William Schweiker, "Time as a Moral Space: Moral Cosmologies, Creation, and Last Judgment" in *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, eds. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000), 134. See also Schweiker, "Church as Academy for Justice," 35-36, in which he says, ". . . the task of the churches amid a world of transnational corporations is to provide an 'outside' perspective on commodification and to form the moral imagination. To use biblical, prophetic terminology, it is a matter of 'knowing justice.' St. Paul put it even better: what is required is a renewal of mind so that we might prove the will of God (Rom 12:1-2)."

[13] William Schweiker, "Knowing and Serving," *Criterion* 34 (Winter 1995): 19.

[14] Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 45-46, 59, 177. See also William Schweiker, "Mourning Times," sermon preached at Rockefeller Memorial Chapel (November 4, 2001) http://rockefeller.uchicago.edu/Sermons/guests/110401sermon.htm.

creatures guided by criteria of justice, mercy, and humility, while also daring to be critical of the dominant, technological worldview of post-theistic society.[15]

It is somewhat surprising that Schweiker does not refer to the category of prophetism more explicitly. This is possibly related to a difference he perceives between negative voices of prophetic critique and more positive voices of moral-ethical imperatives. Schweiker is conversant with the various hermeneutics of suspicion, which may be characterized as being dominated by a rhetoric of negation, but he has chosen instead to focus his work on something he considers to be more constructive, namely, ethical calls to responsible action.[16] I would propose that one way to resolve this possible tension is by a consideration of Schweiker's hermeneutical insights in relation to non-verbal prophetic acts. This allows for his contributions in the areas of hermeneutical realism and meaning-making activity by individuals and communities to be fleshed out in terms of actual symbolic acts, both from biblical source material and more contemporary examples.

In this section, an approach similar to the one used in the previous chapter will be employed. A series of questions will be presented with tentative responses offered in light of the writings of Schweiker. To review, there were four questions considered in reference to Tillich's work. These questions briefly considered prophetic activity from the perspectives of functionality, temporality, practicality, and spatiality. The subsequent analyses emphasized the importance of community to prophetic acts, the openness of

---

[15] Schweiker, "Power and the Agency of God," 221-22. Consider also Schweiker's comment about the future, which according to him "must be seen in value-neutral terms in post-theistic societies. . . . [This] technological outlook must be criticized and limited by the circulation of another form of discourse in the social order, specifically, prophetic discourse." (Ibid., 222.)

[16] This analysis is based on an interview I held with Dr. Schweiker on 6 June 2002.

history to ongoing prophetic acts, the dual nature of religious symbols both pointing to and participating in that which they represent, and the possibility of prophetic activity occurring in both the sacred and secular realms of life.

The goal of the next series of three questions is to illustrate more about the context in which prophetic acts occur, especially in light of the concerns raised about this entire topic area by modern and postmodern thinkers. Therefore, the following questions are teleological, moral-ethical, and hermeneutical in nature. First, if it is contended that authentic prophetic acts can occur in various times of human history, what does that say about how the nature of history itself is to be viewed? Second, if authentic prophetic acts are true expositions of that which is ethically good and virtuous, is their occurrence and appropriation dependent on a philosophical perspective of moral realism? Third, in the interplay between prophetic actor and audience, there are both dramatic and interpretive elements present. How do these constitutive elements of prophetic acts relate to the hermeneutical process of understanding itself? Is there an aspect of hermeneutical realism present in this process that would allow for non-biblical, contemporary prophetic acts to be considered authentic expressions of what is fundamentally good and virtuous? It is hoped that this process of inquiry will contribute to a renewed appreciation of the importance of prophetism and prophetic acts (with their concomitant moral, ethical, and religious values) in our modern/postmodern world.

III. Prophetic Acts & the Fullness of Time

When the Hebrew scriptures describe prophets standing before their community and announcing "Thus says the Lord," what is being articulated is, among other things, a

belief in the active presence of the eternal God into that particular historical moment. Attention to temporal elements dominates most biblical prophetic pronouncements. They commonly build upon past covenantal and historical relationships while both addressing a present crisis and offering future implications of the current course of action. Recall the earlier discussion of Jeremiah 19, in which all three temporal components appear in close succession. First, the announcement formula "Thus says the Lord" (Jer 19:3b) is followed by a brief listing of how the covenant and traditions of the past have been forsaken (Jer 19:4a – "Because of the people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods whom neither they nor their ancestors nor the kings of Judah have known"). Second, the sins of the present are broadly described (Jer 19:4b-5 - ". . . because they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent, and gone on building the high places of Baal to burn their children in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it enter my mind"). Third, the dire implications of these acts for the future are adumbrated (Jer 19:6-13; esp., v. 6 – "Therefore the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when this place shall no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of Slaughter.").[17]

It is appropriate to ask if there are specific presuppositions about temporality that undergird the biblical description of prophetic acts. If so, how might these same presuppositions affect any consideration of modern and contemporary prophetic acts? Schweiker would likely concur with the importance of asking these questions, since he

[17] The other prophetic acts of Jeremiah surveyed in Chapter 2 also contain strong temporal elements, such as the call to remember God's past promises (Jer 51:62), the warning not to rebel against the present occupying forces (Jer 27:6, 17), and the prediction of future disasters (Jer 13:9; 32:3, 15; 43:10). However, the breaking of the flask incident in Jeremiah 19 best contains all three temporal qualities in a single pericope.

has suggested that "conceptions of time are interpretive prisms through which a culture understands its moral world."[18]

The biblical "interpretive prisms" about God and time begin with a fundamental assertion that God is the Creator and Sustainer of all reality, and hence of all time.[19] Perhaps the fullest expression of God being Lord over all aspects of temporality appears in the opening chapter of Revelation: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."[20] With respect to the relationship between God and temporality, Schweiker characterizes the Christian faith perspective as being grounded upon two fundamental claims: God is the sole necessary condition of all that exists, and God has acted and is acting in human history.[21] Yet, bearing in mind the dynamics of postmodern, post-theistic cultural society, Schweiker approaches this topic in recent articles from a slightly different angle. He begins by asking the question, "Is time itself empty or full?" By this he means, do we consider time as being empty space, waiting to be filled by human activity and thereby given by us both meaning and value, or is time already endowed with a meaning and purposeful direction based on the ongoing presence and activity of God?[22]

The former position is one that Schweiker assigns to the modern world. It may arise from a Kantian perspective, in that, for Kant, time is not a direct object of our senses

---

[18] Schweiker, "Time as a Moral Space," 135.
[19] Along with the obvious reference to Gen 1:1, mention can be made of Isa 40:28b (The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.) and Psalm 55:22a (Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you.).
[20] Rev 1:8.
[21] Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 222-23.
[22] William Schweiker, "The Fullness of Time: Reflections on the Millennium," *The Christian Century* 116 (November 3, 1999):1052-53.

and thus is simply the form underlying all our experiences.[23] It may be understood from a materialist perspective, which rejects any claims about the agency of God affecting the world's reality, or from an existentialist perspective, which insists that human freedom is not genuine if a power other than the self is active in the human realm.[24] Yet it can be best summarized as a position suggesting that the job of humankind is to find meaning in life by making meaning. Schweiker's analysis of these views is that they run the risk of both tyranny and nihilism, because they disconnect morality from the foundation of natural reality and they overemphasize human sovereignty in order to protect a post-theistic understanding of both power and authentic freedom.[25]

By contrast, the latter position, that time is "full," describes a biblical construal of reality. It argues that God is the divine creator whose intentional, salvific action permeates all moments of time.[26] Human beings are not "lost in an ocean of meaningless time . . . [but rather] live within the theater of God's goodness."[27] There are at least three advantages associated with this perspective. First, humans are now seen as "creative stewards" of time, partners in a larger activity of creation and sustenance. Second,

---

[23] Schweiker, "Time as a Moral Space," 129. See Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, in which he states: "Even space and time. . . would yet be without objective validity, senseless and meaningless, if their necessary application to the objects of experience were not established. Their representation is a mere schema which always stands in relation to the reproductive imagination that calls up and assembles the objects of experience. Apart from these objects of experience, they would be devoid of meaning." (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965], 193.)

[24] Schweiker, "Power and the Agency of God," 214.

[25] In his analysis, Schweiker makes reference to the work of Irving Singer, who has suggested that meaning in life simply is the creation of value with respect to human needs and inclinations. See Irving Singer, *Meaning in Life: The Creation of Value* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 71. See also Schweiker, "Time as a Moral Space," 131, 134.

[26] Schweiker, "The Fullness of Time," 1052-53. It is noteworthy that Schweiker writes that time is particularly "saturated with moral meaning" within much of the apocalyptic biblical material, such as that found in Mark 13. Without delving into the nuances of such discourses, Schweiker rightly points out that they serve to establish a clear moral cosmology in relation to God and the Son of Man, and to relieve moral ambiguity within cultures that reject the authority of God over all time and the created order. See Schweiker, "Time as a Moral Space," 132-33.

[27] Schweiker, "Time as a Moral Space," 138.

because the divine will "resonates in the depth of human life," loving guidance about morality and justice is given to humans in a way that is far from being tyrannous, which was the risk of the post-theistic alternative.[28] Third, time no longer is seen as having the character of emptiness and chaos, being a category of life waiting for humans both to tame it and fill it with meaning. Rather time is seen as being "full," a place of commemoration in which the past gives guidance to a specific future through present joy.[29]

This discussion about the nature of temporality does not answer the question about the possibility of authentic prophetic acts in modern and contemporary society; however, it does delineate a specific characteristic of such authentic prophetic acts. For the relativist or existentialist, it might be assumed that it is possible for a prophet to arise within a modern community whose philosophy of temporality insists that time is "empty." It could be feasible for figures to offer moral guidance for the future based on that community's knowledge of past traditions and the prophets' insights into the present crisis. Yet, the entire burden of "meaning-making" through prophetic activity would rest on such prophets' shoulders and the finite resources at their disposal. If no other power exists that underlies the created and temporal reality, then human prophetic figures could but offer their best guesses or most intuitive insights, in the face of the options available in a human-made moral universe. However, it seems correct to assume that a characteristic of authentic prophetic acts, arising out of faith in a Creator God, is that all such activity occurs within a temporal context that is "full," as opposed to one empty of meaning, random in activity, and devoid of teleological intent.

---

[28] Ibid., 136.
[29] Schweiker, "The Fullness of Time," 1053.

IV. Prophetic Acts & the Moral-Ethical Foundations of Life

In the previous section, it was asked whether time is "empty" or "full." In this section, the following question will be posed regarding the moral-ethical foundations of life: Do we invent or discover morality? Schweiker explores this question in some detail, describing the opposing categories of moral philosophy represented by these two choices and then ending up taking a median position that is influenced by the work of Paul Ricoeur. His discussion is important for this dissertation because it brings a degree of clarity when seeking to understand the moral context out of which prophetic acts arise and for answering the secondary question about whether prophetic acts can provide authentic moral witness across cultural lines.[30]

In considering the source of morality, one option is to argue that human beings invent their moral reality. This is a philosophical position identified by a variety of names: moral relativism, moral constructivism, moral anti-realism, moral skepticism, and moral existentialism. Schweiker delineates these terms in the following manner. The moral skeptic or constructivist argues that the universe is entirely value-neutral, so all moral values are human constructs and cultural inventions. This position holds that values are things we make and are not objective to us. Quite simply, values are things we happen to value.[31] Therefore, moral codes and moral languages are things taught, rather than things discovered. Such a subjective grounding of morality means that humans are bound only by their conventions and are not answerable to some transcendent Good or

---

[30] William Schweiker, "One World, Many Moralities: A Diagnosis of our Moral Situation," *Criterion* 32 (Spring, 1993): 15, 16.
[31] Schweiker, "Against the Skeptics," 22, 25.

divine God.[32] Moral skepticism shares much with the harsh philosophical stance of moral existentialism, which insists that humans are the sole agents acting in reality; humanity is women and men "cast into a seemingly meaningless world and charged with the terrible burden of making meaning."[33]

The category of moral relativism is, in some ways, less comprehensive than the previous philosophical views, in that relativists do not deny that certain moral positions can be true and of real value. Their primary assertion is that the validity of specific moral beliefs is limited to the culture in which they are found.[34] However, like the previous views, it is a position of moral anti-realism, because relativism would deny there are universally shared human values, which is why this school of thought insists that all our moral judgments reflect our particular cultural tradition.[35] For a variety of reasons, this position is quite popular today. It seems to respect the reality of cultural (and therefore moral) pluralism present in our modern society. It appears to honor our modern sensitivity to the dangers of cultural bias, societal prejudice, and drawing conclusions from limited experiential resources. Moral relativism can be honestly attributed several positive characteristics, such as maximizing human freedom (since we freely invent our

---

[32] Ibid., 26. See also *Power, Value, and Conviction*, in which Schweiker says: "Moral skepticism is doubting that there can be any valid reasons for holding some values as real and true beyond our wishing, saying, or believing them to be real and true." (Schweiker, *Power, Value, and Conviction*, 62.)

[33] William Schweiker, "Consciousness and the Good: Schleiermacher and Contemporary Theological Ethics," *Theology Today* 56 (July 1999): 181. Schweiker associates such positions of moral skepticism with post-theistic society in which "nature is not to be understood as creation and, thus, is not dependent on a transcendent source of value; the dignity of human life is not dependent on the human reflecting the divine as the *imago dei*, . . . [and] the meaning of social and historical existence is not to be grasped by appeal to divine providence." (Schweiker, "Power and the Agency of God," 210.)

[34] Schweiker, "One World, Many Moralities," 17.

[35] Ibid., 18.

moral values) and casting us in the role of "artists of ethics" (since we create value upon the canvas of a morally-neutral universe).[36]

Schweiker argues that positions of moral skepticism and moral relativism are seriously flawed, because inasmuch as we are "artists of ethics" creating moral values for ourselves, we end up making power (i.e., the power to create value) morally basic. This removes any ultimate, transcendent source of value from the human equation. Schweiker suggests that this means the "value of our lives is linked to our power to create value and this makes the quest for power and status in the institutes of power – like economic, political, and cultural institutions – the purpose of life.[37]

The dangers of this perspective are manifold. It would suggest that the moral space of life is reducible to particular social processes and societal dynamics, concurrently denying that any "orientation to some idea of the good, however defined, precedes our actions."[38] It also calls into question the nature of meaningful human agency. For if every "meaning-making act" is affirmative in nature, in that it brings something into being against its possible non-being and negation, then, Schweiker contends, "a sensibility of the goodness of existence is endemic to the very consciousness of being an agent."[39] Schweiker, along with the Christian traditions, insists that it is good

---

[36] Schweiker, *Power, Value, and Conviction*, 9; "Against the Skeptics," 27. Schweiker also accuses moral relativism of being a position of "wanton anthropocentrism," for if human self-consciousness is the source of moral value, how is it possible to avoid reducing all values to human welfare? My concern with this argument is that it could also be leveled against moral realism insofar as human beings serve as the primary recipients of and interpreters for universal moral values. Sorting out this particular dynamic in the overall discussion, though, extends beyond the limits of this particular dissertation. See Schweiker, "Consciousness and the Good," 182.

[37] Schweiker, "Against the Skeptics," 27-28.

[38] Schweiker, "Consciousness and the Good," 181, 196.

[39] Schweiker's language about nonbeing and negation seems to echo the thought of Paul Tillich, especially his discussion on Being and Finitude; see Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:186-189. However, Tillich's discussion is more philosophical and ontological, whereas Schweiker's point of reference is more tangible and ethical. "With a moment's reflection we know that the wanton destruction of something simply to destroy it is unjust, is unkind. Our experience and our acts of meaning-making ironically testify to the same

simply to be, rather than goodness being determined by the power and ability to act (thereby creating value and goodness for ourselves). The former view is the contention of moral realist positions, to which we now direct our attention.

In contrast to the belief that humans invent morality, moral realists assert that morality is something that is discovered. The term "discovered" is difficult to define in concrete terms, so most realists begin by saying what it is not. Morality that is discovered is not "reducible to human creativity," or the product of arbitrary emotional expressions, personal preferences, or social conventions.[40] Nor is it completely relative to a particular cultural setting with its specific calculations of social utility. It is instead the claim that "valid moral norms are rooted in the nature of reality or the nature of human existence."[41] It is a philosophical position that abounded in the ancient Greek world, especially in the works of Aristotle and the Stoics. It is also a theological position at the heart of the Christian faith tradition, particularly if the claim is made that "the being of God is the ground of moral meaning."[42] In such theistic belief systems, moral values are "rooted in the nature of human beings as created by God, . . . [a] God who exists prior to our understanding of the divine will and purposes."[43] For Schweiker, grounding morality in God is more than an abstract theological attribution. He interprets the Genesis 11 account

---

fact, that it is good to exist, it is good to be. On this point, skeptic and realist seem to agree. All of actions either conform to this reality or they rebel against it. In this sense, we always and necessarily live in a world of values." (Schweiker, "Against the Skeptics," 28-29.)

[40] Schweiker, "Understanding Moral Meanings," 84, 87; *Power, Value, and Conviction*, 61, 140.

[41] Schweiker, "One World, Many Moralities," 17.

[42] Schweiker, "Understanding Moral Meaning," 89.

[43] Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 106, 113. See also in the same source (p. 126) the following definition: "The realism of Christian ethics is rooted in a perception of the divine as the source of morality revealed in finite existence."

of the Tower of Babel as a description of how the agency of God constrains abusive expressions of human power.[44] Or, in the language of David Klemm,

> To view nature as creation, the human as creature, and history as purposive is to grasp divine agency not as one agency among others, as one more competing and jealous or forgiving power, but rather as the first and final principle of agency itself, the infinite agency making possible the finite structure of human agency in relation both to the natural world and to other finite human agents. A human agent is a finite origin point of action, circumscribed somewhere and at some time. Divine agency is the origin point of that structure, and its disclosure in the biblical construal of reality limits the arbitrary exercise of power in principle.[45]

Schweiker suggests that Christian moral realism is dominated by two schools of thought in the area of ethics, namely, divine command ethics and natural law ethics. It is not necessary here to flesh out these particular arguments, since a different issue ultimately leads Schweiker to modify the realist position. Schweiker is concerned that realist theologians fail to honor the inherently self-referential and personal nature of moral understanding, which leads to a denigration of the role human subjectivity plays in this entire process.[46] To correct this perceived flaw, Schweiker offers a modified position between moral realism and anti-realism.

Paraphrasing a quote attributed to Paul Ricoeur, Schweiker suggests that "we invent in order to discover."[47] Schweiker often follows this oblique phrase with a brief explanatory sentence. For example, it can be interpreted to mean "we construe the world theologically in order to discover our own most basic moral affirmations" or "we exert

---

[44] See Schweiker, "Power and the Agency of God," 215-217.
[45] David E. Klemm, "Reconstruing Transcendence: A Response to Welker, Keller, Rigby, and Schweiker," in *Power, Powerlessness, and the Divine: New Inquiries in Bible and Theology*, ed. Cynthia Rigby (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 132.
[46] Schweiker, "Understanding Moral Meanings," 85.
[47] Schweiker quotes this phrase in at least four different sources. He footnotes it as coming from Paul Ricoeur's *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976). However, he never provides a page number and I had difficulty locating this Ricoeur phrase in that source. Some of the places it appears in Schweiker's work include "Against the

creative energy in making meanings so as to apprehend the character of our existence and our world." Or, to use slightly more philosophical language, "invention (translation) is actually discovery (insight)" since insight is the passive dimension of comparative understanding arising from within acts of translation.[48]

Schweiker's primary academic focus is in the area of responsibility ethics. In this context, he stresses the Ricoeur paraphrase as a way to affirm that human agency is foundationally responsible, i.e., answerable, to the divine agency and power that undergirds, guides, and limits human agency and power.[49] With the realists, he defends a basic otherness that marks the core of moral meaning and is not reducible to human creativity. However, with the anti-realists, he takes seriously the role of the self, with all its historical and linguistic categories of understanding, as the mediating reality for constructs of moral value that serve as guiding principles for finite human agency.[50] Combining these two positions leads Schweiker to explicate a moral theory approach he calls "hermeneutical realism." This idea will be described more fully in the next section, however I now offer a brief excursus about the connection of this discussion to the topic of prophetic acts.

First, when the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures called upon human beings to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God, their ethical perspective was built upon a foundation of moral realism. They would insist that God, the creator of heaven

---

Skeptics," 30; "Power and the Agency of God," 209; "Understanding Moral Meaning," 79; and *Power, Value, and Conviction*, 120, 133.

[48] Schweiker, "Power and the Agency of God," 209; "Understanding Moral Meanings," 79; *Power, Value, and Conviction*, 120.

[49] Klemm, "Reconstruing Transcendence," 132.

[50] Schweiker, "Understanding Moral Meaning," 87. Elsewhere Schweiker outlines his position this way: "The idea of responsibility is important, then, because it means that an account of reality, that is, metaphysical beliefs, must make sense of the fact that there are agents who act and suffer and make choices about how to live." (Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 16.)

and earth, establishes the moral order and calls people into relationship so that this moral order might be manifest in their individual and communal lives. There is a temptation to elide this prophetic moral realism with divine command ethics. This seems to be a logical movement since the God who is the source of the moral order also commands what is morally right, so that "the moral life is about obedience to those commands."[51] Yet the discussion contained in the first chapter of this dissertation emphasized the active role of prophets in both proclaiming and shaping the word of the Lord. This occurs not only in the act of translating the divine word for possible proclamation, but also in the process of receiving feedback from the audience hearing the prophet's message (or seeing the prophetic act). Theories of divine command ethics have been rightly criticized for not adequately addressing the problem of how one interprets and appropriates such commands from the Lord.[52] An approach to prophetic acts such as Schweiker's system of hermeneutical realism, that takes seriously the role of human subjectivity in any act of moral discovery (insight), can overcome this limitation of moral realism when it is associated with divine command ethics.

Second, some aspects of moral realism have also been modified into systems of internal realism, which basically insist that "people with different moral languages live in different moral worlds."[53] Contemporary Christian moral ethicists who have adopted this type of internal realism are sometimes referred to as "narrative theologians." According to Schweiker, their hermeneutical presupposition is that "the truth of Christian moral

---

[51] Schweiker, "Understanding Moral Meanings," 84.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid., 85. Schweiker references here a work by Hilary Putnam entitled *The Many Faces of Realism* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1987).

claims can only be established internally to those beliefs themselves."[54] As important as the faith narrative is to prophetic figures, it seems ill-advised to consider them representatives of systems of internal realism. It is helpful at this point to recall the earlier discussion of the work of Paul Tillich. Tillich emphasizes the importance of the communal context out of which prophetic activity arises and where prophetic symbols are presented and interpreted. However, Tillich also insists that prophetic symbols participate in the truth or reality to which they point. This symbolic participation in the dimension of "being itself" extends prophetic activity beyond the limits that would seem to be imposed by an internal realist position. Moreover, Tillich's reluctance to create separate sacred and secular spheres of divine activity in the world would undermine efforts to limit prophetic moral authority to specific ("internal") communal settings. Once again, a system like Schweiker's hermeneutical realism offers the means to respect the role of human subjectivity in relation to prophetic activity without rejecting the larger grounding of moral reality in the realm of the divine.

V. Prophetic Acts & the Radical Interpretation of Hermeneutical Realism

Our discussion shall now move briefly into the domain of hermeneutics, an area of study built around the presupposition that human beings are self-interpreting animals.[55] For a slightly more prosaic definition of hermeneutics, Schweiker offers the following two comments. First, hermeneutics contends that human understanding occurs through

---

[54] Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 111. Schweiker includes in this group Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder, and James McClendon.
[55] Schweiker, "Understanding Moral Meanings," 77.

the interpretation of texts, symbols, acts, and events that disclose the human condition.[56] Second, hermeneutics examines within the act of human understanding the relationship between understanding and meaning (that which is understood) as it constitutes consciousness of self, other, and the world, while being ever mindful that understanding is not attained as if it were written upon a blank slate (*tabula rasa*). This is why any hermeneutical process involves both reflecting on reflection and interpreting the interpreter.[57]

Before further commenting on Schweiker's hermeneutical system, two terms of his require brief elaboration: mimesis and hermeneutical realism. First, mimetic theory has been a focal topic for Schweiker from the time of his dissertation at the University of Chicago through the subsequent articles he published during the late 1980s. Mimesis, in its ancient theoretical formulation, is based on the idea that the world is a theater of God's glory with "every aspect of reality [deriving] its purpose and value from its cosmic station."[58] Human beings thus find themselves in an imitative and symbolic universe where much discourse and symbolism takes its meaning not from the particular subject matter or the presentation of human activity, but rather from their "representation of external or natural reality."[59] Schweiker argues that the failing of modern philosophical appropriations of ancient mimetic theory has been in restricting mimesis to imitative or imaginative copying. Through the work of Derrida and others, Schweiker deconstructs

---

[56] William Schweiker, "Beyond Imitation: Mimetic Praxis in Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Derrida," *The Journal of Religion* 68 (January 1988):22-23.
[57] Schweiker, "Understanding Moral Meanings," 82. The inherent risk with any hermeneutic process, though, is falling into an infinite regress of interpreting the interpreter of the interpreter.
[58] Ibid., 5.
[59] Ibid., 5-6. Schweiker footnotes this section with reference to the following works: John D. Boyd, *The Function of Mimesis and Its Decline* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968); Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,

mimesis as "slavish imitation" and redefines it as "figurative praxis through which something is enacted."[60]

Schweiker's general approach is to dissect understanding into various "mimetic activities" that are done in relation to categories of linguistic interpretation, narrative configuration, and human selfhood. But Schweiker's primary task is to challenge the strict deconstructionist view that human understanding and mimetic interpretation arise solely from powers grounded in social processes and individual existence.[61] Schweiker insists that human understanding involves a mimetic act of figuration that is also self-transforming because it includes a dimension of what is both real and transcendent. More will be said about this later, but it is related to Schweiker's locating mimesis (or figurative praxis) within a larger system of hermeneutical realism.

Turning now to the second noteworthy phrase "hermeneutical realism," one reviewer of Schweiker's *Responsibility and Christian Ethics* suggested that his account of hermeneutical realism offers a persuasive "middle ground" between relativism and realism.[62] Schweiker's approach acknowledges the self-referential nature of all morality without going so far as to reduce moral understanding to subjective preferences and cultural conventions. Although interpretations of moral situations necessarily focus on agents who are seeking to evaluate, comprehend, or act in a particular situation, this is not

---

1959); and Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

[60] Schweiker, "Sacrifice, Interpretation, and the Sacred," 793. In the sentence following the quoted material, Schweiker elaborates by saying that mimesis as figurative praxis is "the dynamic meeting of signification and praxis, meaning and power, in social practices, texts, and even interpretation." It is also worth noting that Schweiker uses the phrases "figurative praxis" and "performative praxis" interchangeably, although the latter formulation is more trenchant in relation to this dissertation's interest in prophetic acts. See Schweiker, *Mimetic Reflections*, 13.

[61] Schweiker, *Mimetic Reflections*, 34, 189-191.

[62] Jean Porter, review of *Responsibility and Christian Ethics,* by William Schweiker, *Modern Theology* 13 (April 1997): 287.

the same as to suggest that the moral answers are solely dependent on the agents and their preferences.

> Moral claims refer to some agent or community because these claims are only intelligible when apprehended through the medium of our language, traditions, beliefs, and forms of life. But interpreting these claims shows, or seeks to show, that valid moral norms, accounts of moral situations, and decisions about what to do are not reducible to the subjective understanding of an agent. I have called this position hermeneutical realism in ethics.[63]

One can argue that the advantage of this perspective is that it takes seriously the complex and diverse nature of human life without resorting to the flawed options of either limiting moral knowledge to the particularities of local communities or diluting moral judgments by consigning them to the broad category of universal perspective.[64]

Having surveyed Schweiker's definitions of mimesis and hermeneutical realism, it is possible to appreciate their applicability to the present discussion about prophetic acts, especially when it is recalled that Schweiker's entire system operates within a framework of theological ethics. Mimesis comes into play because religion itself is highly mimetic in nature, being largely comprised of "the activity of individuals and communities enacting or performing, and hence figuring, a relation with what claims them as ultimate."[65] Since Christian ethics is "committed to some form of realist moral theory because the reality of God, the ultimate human good, is prior to moral traditions or human invention, hermeneutical realism is also involved."[66]

---

[63] Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 40.
[64] William Schweiker and Michael Welker, "A New Paradigm of Theological and Biblical Inquiry," in *Power, Powerlessness, and the Divine: New Inquiries in Bible and Theology*, ed. Cynthia Rigby (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 12.
[65] Schweiker, "Beyond Imitation," 35. He goes on to point out that "religions are mimetic figurations of affective responses to the emerging power (*physis*) of what is and the temporal ambiguity of human being and doing as these mediate the ultimate." (Ibid.)
[66] Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 106. See also: "The Christian is always trying to perceive the divine reality and purposes in the world. From the perspective of this form of realism, moral beliefs and cognitive schemes are empty without the experience that funds them." (Ibid., 110.)

Schweiker is among those thinkers who believe that hermeneutical inquiry is a dialogical and dialectical process. For him, it involves a dialogical interaction between oneself and another, as well as being an ongoing dialectic, complete with feedback, counter-arguments, and reappraisals in light of how understanding led to specific action.[67] At the heart of this process is the realization that "in trying to understand oneself, one also grasps a relation to what is other than self but inscribed in the self."[68]

In attaining understanding through such acts of dialectical interpretation, a "fusion of horizons" occurs between the interpreter and that which is understood. Drawing on the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Schweiker describes the dynamics of this *Horizont-verschmelzung* as being mimetic in nature:

> Through the interpretive *Spiel* there is a double transformation into figurative structure. On the side of what is interpreted, this figuration is the specific performance of the work, the production of its "meaning." For the interpreter, the figuration is found in the formation of understanding; it is the cultivation (*Bildung*) of consciousness. Thus, the fusion of horizons won through interpretation is a leap into the truth when through it what is interpreted and the one interpreting are mimetically figured and disclosed anew in relation to each other. There is a performative relation of the work and understanding through the mimetic act of interpretation. Understanding and its object are bound together. They are mimetic phenomena because they come to presentation in the figurative praxis of interpretation.[69]

At the risk of oversimplifying Schweiker's position, he suggests that the process of human understanding builds upon a common formal structure of mimetic action, in

---

[67] Ibid., 81-82. This is also why Schweiker mentions in several places that "hermeneutics" comes from "Hermes," the messenger God who traveled between the worlds. See Schweiker, *Power, Value, and Conviction*, 119.

[68] Schweiker, "Understanding Moral Meanings," 82. The ascription of "other in self" can, for Schweiker, take many forms: historical consciousness, other persons, the good, or God in the self. He refers to this as "a prereflective, inarticulate openness to the other." (Ibid.) This line of thought bears a strong resemblance to the theological perspective of John Calvin, with his emphasis on the interrelation of knowledge of God and knowledge of self – an insight that opens his *Institutes.* See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vol. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 35.

[69] William Schweiker, "Sacrifice, Interpretation, and the Sacred: The Import of Gadamer and Girard for Religious Studies," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55 (Winter 1987): 796-97.

that "the picturing, making, and forming of a life-world with reference to what is encountered in the effort and feeling of action is found in all cultures and traditions."[70] This common formal structure is the context out of which arises the world of understanding, in which "we invent in order to discover something about others and ourselves." Specifically, it involves a practice (interpretation) shaped by a movement between worlds (translation) while leading to its own intrinsic good (insight).[71] Furthermore, as much as the interpretative process of understanding is mimetic in nature and leads to a "fusion of horizons," it is also performative and transformative in character. Understanding is the "figuring of human world while through that act it (i.e., understanding) is also transformed."[72]

Schweiker interweaves hermeneutics and mimesis in order to lead his readers to the foundational moral demand that he believes underlies the formal structure of understanding, namely, the imperative of responsibility. As central as this is to Schweiker's own work, I do not intend to explore this latter aspect of Schweiker's system. I am more interested in his analysis of the hermeneutical process, because it is my contention that authentic prophetic acts are an example of the performative, transformative, horizon-fusing activity that Schweiker suggests can lead to moral-ethical understanding and true insight.

It is in Schweiker's understanding of how the nature of mimetic or performative praxis is both figurative and transformative that his work most closely relates to the topic of prophetic acts and can provide some guidance for evaluating the efficacy and

---

[70] Schweiker, *Power, Value, and Conviction*, 132.
[71] Ibid., 133.
[72] Schweiker, *Mimetic Reflections*, 189.

authenticity of modern prophetic activity. It was mentioned earlier that Schweiker seeks to redefine mimesis by moving it away from traditional categories of imitation and imaginative copying. The term itself is built around the Greek word *mimos*, from which comes the related word 'mime', i.e., dramatic acts usually devoid of speech. Since the action of a mime presents a play for an audience and the cultic action of a priest similarly enacts sacred myth for worshipers, Schweiker rightly argues that it is misguided to overlook the performative character of mimesis through definitions that limit mimetic praxis to "imitation."[73] He suggests that instead of seeing figurative praxis as a re-presentation of some prior reality (*Urbild*), it should be recognized as a presentation through interpretative acts that allows being (*Dasein*) to become meaningful and real.[74]

This process is by no means a passive one. Interpretation is active, moving (like Hermes) between worlds to gain insight into our own lives and the lives of others; and it is responsible i.e., involving the process of giving a response, because it leads us to participate in a shared world of moral action and discourse.[75] To put it more concisely, interpretative praxis can be understood as "a dramatic performance that seeks to manifest what is interpreted in experience and action;" it is how "individuals and communities form, reconstruct, and enact themselves through time giving coherence to experience."[76] It is because of the active nature of both performative, mimetic praxis and its concomitant

---

[73] Schweiker, *Mimetic Reflections*, 2 and "Beyond Imitation," 36.
[74] Schweiker, *Mimetic Reflections*, 211. In earlier comments on mimetic praxis, Schweiker offered this summation: "Thus "world," "text," and "self" cannot be understood simply as imitative representations of God, author, or the *imago Dei*. As forms of mimetic praxis, they are dramatic enactments in which being becomes meaningful and experience structured and unified through figural acts." (Ibid., 205.)
[75] Schweiker, *Power, Value, and Conviction*, 131. Schweiker delineates three aspects of this process: interaction between community and text or tradition; reconstruction of these through performative praxis; and finally a creative consummatory actualization of what has been enacted rendering it into an integrated whole and into understanding. See William Schweiker, "Iconoclasts, Builders, and Dramatists: The Use of Scripture in Theological Ethics," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1986): 149.
[76] Schweiker, "Iconoclasts, Builders, and Dramatists," 151.

interpretative processes that Schweiker is moved to argue that human understanding involves both figurative and transformative qualities. As he puts it, "the world configured in understanding means that we live, move, and have our being in figural patterns of language and tradition that draw their import from interpretive practices *even as they shape human life* [italics added]."[77]

If the aspect of human understanding that is transformed through this mimetic and interpretive process is part of the realm of moral sensibility, then a fundamental change has occurred. An active process of self-critical reflection and moral discernment has led to a "radical interpretation," which Schweiker defines as occurring whenever the "values and norms a person or community endorses as important to its life are transformed by some idea, symbol, or event which rightly claims to guide conduct because it articulates and deepens the experience which instigates the moral life."[78] This philosophical definition of "radical interpretation" expands quite easily into a more theological construct. For example, Schweiker suggests that for Christian faith, God is "the name for the radical interpretation of ultimate reality in which power is transformed in recognition of and care for finite existence."[79] It is precisely this type of radical interpretation that

---

[77] Mimetic theory influences Schweiker, so that, in his view, human understanding is a process of interpreting and presenting (or figuring) reality. In the sentences preceding the above quotation, Schweiker says: "A turn to mimetic praxis in understanding has meant that Being becomes meaningful in and through the act of interpretation; meaning is dependent on and interrelated with certain practical activities of individuals or communities that structure experience. Hence a figure is not so much a re-presentation of prior, more originary reality (*Urbild*) as a presentation through the interpretive act in which there is a leap into the true, an increase of being. This act is also a transformation of the one who understands." See Schweiker, *Mimetic Reflections*, 211.

[78] William Schweiker, "Radical Interpretation and Moral Responsibility: A Proposal for Theological Ethics," *The Journal of Religion* 73 (October 1993):615. See also Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 159. Schweiker uses the term 'radical' not in the sense of this transformation being revolutionary in nature, but rather in the sense of the transformation being fundamental and comprehensive, striking "at the root of who we are . . . and the conceptual frameworks that we have used to understand ourselves and our world." (Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 176.)

[79] Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, 179.

was at the heart of the message of the Hebrew prophets when they challenged Israel to remember their relationship to God and return to lives of faithful obedience. It is also the possible result from encountering the teachings of Jesus Christ, particularly when any disciple (ancient or modern) is forced to answer the question, "Who do you say I am?"[80] Ultimately, theology strives to be a "mimesis of the divine, to present figuratively the ways of God and thereby to refigure human life."[81] If this is true, then prophetic acts are examples of the symbolic events that, to borrow Schweiker's language, rightly claim to guide conduct because they articulate and deepen the experiences which instigate the moral life.

In an article entitled "Interpretation, Teaching, and American Theological Ethics," Schweiker concisely describes this relationship between symbolic events and moral self-understanding. He begins with the premise that "understanding is the relation of what is interpreted to who is interpreting as that relation is constituted through the activity of interpretation."[82] Hermeneutics reminds us that understanding "is not simply the act of the solitary mind wedding precepts to concepts."[83] It is a more active process, usually involving a larger community that both provides material for consideration and helps judge the authenticity of what is being presented. Symbols play a key role in shaping the ideas and reconstructing the experiences that lead to interpretative conclusions. Religious symbols go even further, in that they "disclose, by means of critical interpretation,

---

[80] Matt 16:15. See Schweiker, "Radical Interpretation and Moral Responsibility," 626.
[81] Schweiker, *Mimetic Reflections*, 229.
[82] William Schweiker, "Interpretation, Teaching, and American Theological Ethics," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1990): 286.
[83] Ibid.

something about human existence in relation to the divine, others, and ourselves. They show us what we would not otherwise see."[84]

Schweiker was led to his conclusions about performative praxis and radical interpretation through encounters with numerous other thinkers. From Paul Ricoeur came the insight that "we come to self-understanding through the long detour of encountering what is other than self: texts, traditions, other persons."[85] From Friedrich Schleiermacher came the idea that to be human means "we exist in a moral space precisely through the organizing and symbolizing functions of reason in creating culture."[86] Soren Kierkegaard, Jacques Derrida, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Tillich and others can be added to this list. But serving as the foundation for Schweiker's ethical thought is the theological belief that God is the source of morality (as opposed to popular consensus, social preferences, or personal imagination) and thus there is an "irreducible otherness" co-present in all acts of moral self-understanding.[87] Therefore, Schweiker's equation connects the idea of God, who makes time itself meaningful and is the ground of true moral values, with a modern grasp of the complexities of human self-understanding, and of concomitant acts of mimetic figuration and transformation, leading to experiences of moral insight that he identifies as "radical interpretation." Included in this formula is some sort of moral

---

[84] Ibid. Compare this idea with the similar viewpoint expressed by Tillich and mentioned in the preceding chapter. For example, Tillich commented in at least two places how religious symbols open up "levels of reality which otherwise are hidden and cannot be grasped in any other way." See Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 56 and *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 42.

[85] William Schweiker, "Disputes and Trajectories in Responsibility Ethics," *Religious Studies Review* 27 (January 2001): 22.

[86] Schweiker, "Consciousness and the Good," 190 – quoting from Schleiermacher's *Introduction to Christian Ethics.*

[87] Schweiker, "Understanding Moral Meanings," 87. Insofar as these two premises need to be reconciled, Schweiker seeks to do so with his system of hermeneutical realism.

catalyst or symbolic event. It is my contention that authentic prophetic acts fit quite well in this particular moral-ethical role.

VI. Concluding Remarks

Some of the questions raised in the first chapters of this dissertation can now be given tentative responses. The opening chapters acknowledged that prophetic activity is commonly restricted to the era associated with the biblical canon. Prophets in the Hebrew scripture were evidently closely linked with the Israelite monarchy and therefore appear to cease being active after the sixth century BCE. The sentiment expressed in 1 Macc 9:27 ("So there was great distress in Israel, such as had not been seen since the time that prophets ceased to appear among them") expresses the consensus concerning the end of prophetic activity that was prevalent in the Second Temple period. But with the writings of the New Testament comes the expectation that a long-awaited revival of prophetism has occurred through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. John the Baptist and Jesus Christ are both identified as prophetic figures. However, just as the demise of the Israelite monarchy signals for many scholars the end of prophetism during the time period of the Hebrew scriptures, the close of the apostolic age and the Montanist controversy serve for other scholars as a convenient ending date for New Testament-based prophetic activity.

At the close of Chapter One, four authors were briefly surveyed who each were willing to extend the category of prophetism into contemporary times. Thomas Overholt took an anthropological approach to this question. He enumerated examples of prophetic activity from outside the biblical canonical tradition and offered three general categories

for recognizing modern day prophetism: modern prophets should exhibit behavior similar to that done by accepted biblical prophetic precursors; they should possess rhetorical skill in communicating with their community in time of crisis; and their authenticity can be verified in retrospect through the fulfillment of prophecies offered by these figures. W. Sibley Towner also argued in favor of contemporary prophetic activity, believing that biblical situations and the modern context are analogous in nature and that biblical, prophetic language can be spoken in both settings. William Ramsay identified several people as "modern day prophets" roughly for the same reasons outlined by Towner, namely, that their contemporary message of social justice is analogous in style and intent to that of their ancient prophetic predecessors. Similarly, G. McLeod Bryan named people as modern prophets who possessed the ability to both judge and offer words of redemption to contemporary society based on their personal foundations of faith and moral integrity. Chapter One ended with the sense that modern prophetic activity is possible through a generalized theory of correspondence, i.e., those that resemble the activity of biblical prophets in style, rhetoric, and faith community context could possibly be recognized in a similar role in contemporary settings.

To offer more than just a general theory of correspondence, and to keep this discussion from growing too unwieldy, the category of prophetism was narrowed to that of prophetic acts in Chapter Two. After surveying specific examples from the prophet Jeremiah that could be considered paradigmatic, a working definition of prophetic acts was offered: they are *deliberate, specific, communicative, and interactive acts performed by representatives of a faith community with the intent of interpreting and transforming human perceptions and actions in light of the divine nature and will of God.* This more

detailed definition moved modern prophetism away from simply fitting within a general theory of correspondence and instead aligned it with a more specialized category of religiously grounded, moral-ethical communication. In place of modern prophets simply being whoever superficially resembles biblical prophets, acts of contemporary prophetism can be analyzed in relation to specific categories of dialogical communication and interpretive praxis.

This shift in focus, however, is not without its own set of complicating factors. Several questions are raised: What role is played by the prophet's community of faith and/or audience? What significance is attached to the historical context of the prophetic activity? How should the "medium" of the prophetic message be analyzed? What resources are available for attempting to decide whether or not prophetic activity is authentic and meaningful? In Chapter Three, a brief review of Paul Tillich's work offers substantive guidance for these concerns. Tillich first asserts that there is an important quality of correlation in which the questions of society encounter the creative answers offered by the activity of the Spiritual Presence within the communal context of prophetic figures. Second, this activity is especially prevalent during kairotic moments in history. Third, prophets utilize symbolic resources that ideally draw all involved into experiences of the dimension of fundamental depth, or being itself, so that knowledge of the eternal can become present in light of particular acts or events. Lastly, this activity occurs in both the latent and manifest Spiritual Community, thereby expanding the location of prophetism beyond the boundaries of traditional ecclesiastical communities.

In the current chapter, the theological ethics of William Schweiker guided a consideration of the relation of prophetic acts and hermeneutical theory. Without

detailing all the nuances of a formal ontology, Schweiker's ethical system is grounded upon a theistic system of beliefs shaped by two foundational principles. To begin with, Schweiker posits a teleological historical perspective, suggesting that biblical understandings about God and time profess that God is the Creator and Sustainer of all life, endowing history with both meaning and direction. Schweiker also challenges the philosophies of moral relativism by presenting an ethical system constructed upon a foundation of modified moral realism. He balances the idea that valid moral norms are rooted in the nature of reality with an honest recognition of the necessary role human subjectivity plays in all moral understanding. Schweiker's hermeneutical realism offers a positive alternative to the anti-realist perspective inherent in much of postmodern thought.

Schweiker's conclusions bring the discussion of prophetism and prophetic acts full circle. At the onset was a discussion about the characteristics of prophetic activity, both in terms of biblical paradigms and possible modern examples. The conclusions reached, however, seemed to rely on a general theory of correspondence, suggesting that prophetic activity can be recognized in varied contexts through its resemblance to the paradigmatic examples from in the Hebrew scriptures. Upon closer examination, particularly in light of specific prophetic acts such as those attributed to Jeremiah, the nature of prophetism is seen to go beyond rhetorical and stylistic similarities to a deeper level of intentional moral communication delivered to transform ethical patterns of behavior in individuals and communities. The problem, though, is that this perspective on prophetism does not entirely resolve the postmodern insistence on moral relativism. It could be argued that prophets can exist today who resemble in word and deed the

prophets of the Hebrew scriptures and who offer compelling activity for the purpose of individual and communal, moral transformation; yet that alone is not sufficient either to consider such figures as authentic intermediaries for God, or to believe their acts and messages are applicable beyond the boundaries of their specific faith community.

Schweiker's hermeneutical realism addresses this problem by describing how prophetic acts and religious symbols are mimetic catalysts that act in the process of human understanding to bring about transformations in moral perspectives in relation to truth and goodness as grounded in the divine. Since this occurs on the formal level of moral self-understanding, it allows prophetic acts to be considered as authentic avenues for dialogical encounters with the divine (the source of moral values) and offering transformative insights applicable beyond limited historical or communal contexts.

The category of prophetic acts, shaped by the paradigmatic examples of prophetism found in the canonical scriptures, involves more than mere descriptions of unique religious behavior from a restricted historical period. Rather, encounters with, and the interpretation of, any such figurative acts can transform moral self-understanding and provide insight into transhistorical values that are grounded in God.[88] This combination of descriptive and formal characteristics makes it possible to offer judgments on the authenticity of prophetic activity that might occur in modern and postmodern historical contexts.

Given the dependence of this thesis upon the theological ethics of William Schweiker, it is fair to note that his position is not without its critics. In a review of his first book, Kathryn Tanner was concerned that Schweiker's ethical conclusions seem

[88] Recall the citation from Chapter Two (n. 114), in which R. Davidson associated authentic prophetic activity with an adherence to the "essential moral realism of Yahwehism."

"forced and undeveloped," and that his hermeneutics failed to "produce a genuinely postmodern mimetics."[89] A reviewer of his second text contended Schweiker had a tendency "to move from very general concepts or observations to quite specific philosophical conclusions" in a way that was not convincing.[90] Several reviewers have criticized a lack of Christological focus in his system of theological ethics.[91] From my own reading of Schweiker's work, there is a difficulty in grasping how his moral-ethical insights can provide guidance and be applied in concrete, contemporary situations. For despite all his discussion of performative praxis, the movement from theory to action seems inconclusive.

Keeping in mind these concerns, it is appropriate to explore how this entire discussion about the possibility of contemporary prophetic acts, including Schweiker's theological ethics and system of hermeneutical realism, might be applied to concrete acts of moral-ethical proclamation in contemporary U.S. culture. Given the role that hindsight still plays in any consideration of historical prophetic activity, it is prudent to refrain from examining events that are too recent or not yet fully understood. Rather, two pivotal moments within the United States Civil Rights movement of the mid-20th century will serve as case study exemplars. In the following chapter, Rosa Parks' 1955 decision to remain seated on a Montgomery Bus will be reviewed, as will Dr. Martin Luther King's

---

[89] Kathryn Tanner, review of *Mimetic Reflections*, by William Schweiker, *The Journal of Religion* 73 (January 1993): 118.

[90] Jean Porter review, (April 1997): 287.

[91] "How is the Christian tradition, and especially Christ, decisive for this indisputably theological ethic?" (Harlan Beckley, review of *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, by William Schweiker, *The Journal of Religion* 77 [January 1997]: 170.) "One shortcoming of this book is its insufficient treatment of classical Christian symbols and themes." (Stephen J. Pope, review of *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, by William Schweiker, *Theological Studies* 57 [September 1996]: 559.) "Elsewhere, the focus on 'God and God alone' allows Schweiker to shift from the submissive *imitatio Christi* to a properly self-creating *imitatio Dei.* Instead of doing the will of the Father, 'we now have a symbolism of the human as creator

1963 arrest and subsequent writing of "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Some have attached the epithet "prophetic" to these events. The preceding discussion and analysis will now be brought to bear upon these historical acts in order to make a scholarly contribution to the larger question about the possibility of contemporary prophetic acts.

---

and traveler of worlds.'" (R. R. Reno, review of *Power, Value, and Conviction: Theological Ethics in the Postmodern Age*, by William Schweiker, *Princeton Theological Seminary Bulletin* 21 [July, 2000]: 272.)

Chapter 5:
The Modern Prophetic Acts of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr.

I. Introduction

The category of prophetic activity still exists in today's world and is occasionally applied to people and events in contemporary society.[1] At the end of Chapter One, G. McLeod Bryan's list of criteria for identifying modern prophets was cited. His work is significant because it suggests what standards have been recently proposed to help in discerning examples of contemporary prophetism. To paraphrase Bryan's criteria, prophets are people whose message 1) has universal implications for the present and the future, 2) arises from a concrete situation applicable to most humans, and 3) is grounded in a strong moral integrity, faith commitment, and insistence on peace with justice.[2] In the second chapter, a working definition was offered for identifying prophetic acts, namely that they are *deliberate, specific, communicative, interactive acts performed by*

[1] "Prophetic" tends to be used grammatically more in adjectival senses than as a nominative designation. For example, people or events are considered to demonstrate prophetic qualities in their ability to foreshadow things that eventually come to pass or in their embodiment of ideals associated with ideologies or faith traditions, rather than themselves being attributed the title of 'prophet.'

[2] G. McLeod Bryan, *Voices in the Wilderness: Twentieth-Century Prophets Speak to the New Millennium* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1999), 3.

representatives of faith communities with the intent of interpreting and transforming human perceptions of reality and actions in light of the divine nature and will of God.

Even when guided by the latter definition of prophetic acts, it remains difficult to attribute that quality to contemporary events with any degree of authority. Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos and others have already been given canonical status as prophets in the Hebrew scriptures; no such authenticating and authoritative mechanism exists for naming contemporary prophets in today's world. Any attempt to do so, as has already been demonstrated, necessarily involves excursions into various, affiliate realms of discourse and authority, such as rhetoric, philosophy, and hermeneutics. We noted earlier, for example, Kelvin Friebel's articulation of the fourfold rhetorical process connected with all examples of prophetic communication: 1) gaining an audience's attention, and then making sure a message is 2) comprehended, 3) remembered, and 4) accepted by the audience so that it might lead to altered behaviors and attitudes.[3] Paul Tillich's work was surveyed in terms of his understandings of theology of culture, and whether contemporary prophetic acts could fit within his philosophy of kairotic moments, symbolic representations, and the activity of the Spiritual Presence in the world. William Schweiker's writings were then considered to see how hermeneutical realism and theological ethics might lead people to accept prophetic activity in modern society insofar as such activity is interpreted as being morally transformative and grounded in the transhistorical values of God.

At this point in the discussion, it is appropriate to move from theory to the realm of concrete praxis. The primary question of this dissertation is whether prophetic acts are

---

[3] Kelvin Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts: Rhetorical Nonverbal Communication*, Journal of the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 283 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 14, 15.

possible in contemporary society, and the preceding expositions have suggested that such activity can exist. This chapter considers these preliminary conclusions in reference to two twentieth-century events in the United States that could reasonably be designated as prophetic acts. These events are the 1955 historic refusal of Rosa Parks to vacate her seat on a Montgomery city bus, and the 1963 arrest of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his subsequent composition of the "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Both events date from the period of the Civil Rights movement in the United States. Both are recent enough to be applicable to the twenty-first century context, while being distant enough to allow for a degree of historical perspective and editorial balance when describing them.

To accomplish this goal of comparing the prior conclusions about prophetic activity with two modern examples, a fourfold process will be followed. First, a brief description of how the incident is commonly remembered will be offered. Second, the event will be compared and contrasted with an earlier (and at least implicitly related) historical incident, so that precedence can be explored. Third, a fuller exposition of the event will be given, including correctives to the commonly-held versions of the incident and elaboration of the concomitant motives and influences involved in each case. Fourth, in light of Friebel's categories for rhetorical communication and the working definition of prophetic activity already offered, an evaluation will be given concerning the appropriateness of considering these two events to be authentic prophetic acts. When this task has been completed, what will remain is a concluding consideration of the possibility of prophetic acts in more recent times, as well as in the immediate future. It is hoped that this entire discussion will assist in reclaiming the importance of prophetism as a key

category with continued relevance for both contemporary Christian theology and life in postmodern society.

II. The Day Rosa Parks Refused to Move

The prophetic event associated with Rosa Parks has been characterized over the years in the following way: On 1 December 1955, this good-hearted, non-political, middle-aged seamstress was simply so tired from working her shift at the Montgomery Fair Department Store that she refused to give up her seat on the bus home from work and set in motion the Civil Rights movement in America.[4] Versions of this flawed recounting shaped the earliest accounts of Rosa Parks' story, even when the authors were trying to present a sympathetic and accurate portrayal of their subject.[5] This faulty account succeeds in honoring various admirable qualities present in Parks' story, namely, her womanhood, her work ethic, and her physical tiredness after a hard day at her job. Unfortunately, it downplays the fundamental issue of racial inequality in favor of focusing on the contrast between a tired woman and a belligerent bus driver. Also, it ignores the mountain of evidence that insists that Rosa Parks should never be characterized simply as a "good-hearted seamstress." Any consideration of the prophetic quality of Rosa Parks' actions must first challenge and correct the lingering cultural myths associated with her historic act that December day in Montgomery, Alabama.

Before launching into a broad discussion of Rosa Parks' 1955 act of civil disobedience, an act of civil disobedience that occurred twenty-five years prior on

---

[4] Douglas Brinkley, *Rosa Parks* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 159, 226-27.
[5] For example, this approach can be found in the writings of Eloise Greenfield, including her children's book (*Rosa Parks* [New York: HarperCollins, 1973]) and a subsequent magazine article ("Rosa Parks," *Ms.* 3 [August 1974]: 71-74.)

another continent first will be briefly considered, namely, the 1930 Salt March of Mahatma Gandhi.[6] Similar to the Rosa Parks event, the Salt March can be described in a few sentences. On 12 March 1930, Gandhi and 78 followers departed by foot from his ashram located outside Ahmedabad. Their plan was to walk about 240 miles to the coastal city of Dandi, where Gandhi would lead the group in picking up natural sea salt from the coastal beaches. This simple act intentionally defied the oppressive Salt Laws in India, and would ultimately spark a movement of mass civil disobedience that culminated in the transfer of power away from the colonial British government.[7]

The Salt March was characterized by Gandhi as a *satyagraha*. This is a Gujarati word meaning "truth-force" that he coined as a way to describe "striving non-violently to the point of sacrifice rather than fighting to attain one's vision of truth."[8] When the Indian National Congress had met in Lahore in December 1929, Gandhi had been given permission to organize some form of massive civil disobedience. As he considered what course of action to pursue, Gandhi was encouraged by the 1928 success of a tax resistance *satyagraha* in the nearby district of Bardoli.[9] Yet when Gandhi first announced

---

[6] The political activity of Mahatma Gandhi was instrumental in establishing the category of civil disobedience as an effective means of social change. His protests and nonviolent methods can be interpreted as setting the stage for the entire U.S. Civil Rights movement. Gandhi's example provided a general philosophy, specific instruments for action, and a grounding in religious beliefs that strongly influenced the subsequent American movement for racial and economic justice led by Dr. King and others.

[7] The Salt Laws were a recurrent source of contention and civil unrest for many reasons, including the fact that they taxed the poor at the same level as they taxed the wealthy, they protected a government monopoly by forbidding local industries from making salt (causing economic hardship), and they were sometimes used to balance the budget of, in Gandhi's view, the imperialistic British government. See Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi and Civil Disobedience: The Mahatma in Indian Politics 1928-34* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 94-95, 101.

[8] Brown, *Gandhi and Civil Disobedience*, 16. Gandhi actually ran a contest to create a word in place of the less satisfactory English phrase 'passive resistance.' He then modified the winning entry "sadagraha" (truth + firmness) into "satyagraha." See M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (London: Jonathan Cape Paperback, 1966), 266.

[9] The Bardoli *satyagraha* was led by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, although he acted under Gandhi's authority. It lasted about five months and focused on forcing a reduction in the proposed level of taxes assessed upon land in the Bardoli region. See Dennis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 92 and Brown, *Gandhi and Civil Disobedience*, 29.

that the focus of his campaign would be to protest against the Salt Laws, even his closest supporters were surprised and skeptical. It is true that Indians had fought for the removal of the Salt Tax for decades, but it was not seen to be as fundamentally oppressive as other laws enforced by the British regime. Also, since the manufacture of salt predominantly occurred in the coastal region, it was questioned how this particular choice for civil disobedience could ever lead to a nationwide uprising.[10]

Gandhi, however, outlined the various levels of injustice manifest in this tax. First, the tax falls on perhaps "the greatest necessity of life" and the "only condiment of the poor."[11] Second, since the law forbids the local manufacture of this natural resource and it costs money to dispose of what is naturally produced, the tax both cripples an important coastal region industry and wastes national capital.[12] Third, it fosters an unnecessary dependence on the importation of British salt. From Gandhi's perspective, this tax law allowed the government to steal the people's salt and then make them, rich and poor alike, pay heavily to replace the stolen commodity.

When Gandhi set forth on 12 March 1930 from his ashram, he was 60 years old and the oldest participant in the trek.[13] The group's goal was about ten miles a day, so the journey was not excessively strenuous.[14] However, it was disciplined in terms of maintaining as much as possible of the daily routine from the ashram, and in avoiding any hint of luxury or living "above the means befitting a poor country."[15] The Salt March

---

[10] Ibid., 99-100.
[11] Ibid., 100.
[12] M. K. Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance (Satyagraha)* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 247; quoting article that appeared in *Young India* on 3 April 1930.
[13] Martin Green, *Gandhi: Voice of a New Revolution* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1993), 314.
[14] "Our march is in reality child's play. Less than twelve miles per day in two stages with not much luggage should cause no strain. Those who have not been footsore have gained in weight." (Gandhi, *Non-violent Resistance*, 248; again quoting article from *Young India*, 3 April 1930.)
[15] Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 110; Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance*, 236-37.

regularly attracted crowds numbering into the tens of thousands, not to mention extensive coverage of it by the global press network. The British colonial government was indecisive about whether to arrest Gandhi as soon as he began his march. By not taking this action, they soon discovered they were allowing him to proclaim to the multitudes his message of *swaraj* (self-rule) amid a public display of disciplined moral conviction that would earn him the title of *mahatma* (great soul).[16]

The procession reached the sea on the evening of 5 April, but it was decided not to perform any acts of civil disobedience until the next day. Early on the morning of 6 April, Gandhi and at least 2000 followers waded into the saltwater to bathe and purify themselves according to Hindu customs. Then at 6:30 a.m., Gandhi reached down on the shore and picked up some rough sea salt and reportedly said, "With this, I am shaking the foundations of the British Empire."[17] Almost immediately, large numbers of the Indian populace became involved in acts of civil disobedience. By some reports, thousands swarmed to the beaches to collect the salt and then sell it in the markets in defiance of the law. Pickets blocked the entrances to many shops selling British textiles and imported goods. By the governments' own estimates, by the end of the year, over 60,000 people were imprisoned for acts as seemingly minor as what Gandhi had done that historic morning on the beaches of Dandi.[18]

Although one could consider the Salt March simply as a well-orchestrated act of political savvy and populist defiance, it was an event laden with too much symbolic

---

[16] Dalton quotes one newspaper as saying: "To arrest Gandhi is to set fire to the whole of India. Not to arrest him is to allow him to set the prairie on fire." (Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 112.)
[17] Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 115.
[18] William L. Shirer, *Gandhi: A Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 95-96; Stanley Wolpert, *Gandhi's Passion: The Life and Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 148; Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 114-15.

import and religious significance to be considered a purely utilitarian affair. Gandhi did benefit in the planning of this 'salt *satyagraha*' from an earlier march he had led in South Africa in 1913.[19] He also had the foresight to plan his route so that it traveled through many of the same villages that had successfully taken part in the recent Bardoli *satyagraha*.[20] But what Gandhi accomplished at Dandi was a symbolic act that, in the words of one eyewitness, "fired the imagination of the Indian masses and set them on a course the Mahatma was confident would lead to independence before he died."[21]

Gandhi intentionally chose 6 April as the day of his civil disobedience because it was the first day of "National Week," a commemorative period dating back to 1919 when Gandhi first let a national hartal (work stoppage) against the British government.[22] He also traveled the entire Salt March with the symbols of a *tilak* (colored decorative spot indicating membership in a religious caste) on his forehead, a garland of *khadi* (domestic hand-spun cloth) on his shoulders, and a walking stick in his hand.[23] No small detail was overlooked for symbolic potential. For example, when Gandhi wrote a letter to Lord Irwin shortly before starting out on the march, he had a British subject hand-deliver the note to Irwin. In Gandhi's own words, "I am having [this letter] specially delivered by a young English friend who believes in the Indian cause and is a full believer in non-

---

[19] This "Great March" from Natal into the Transvaal lasted for five days and was much more unwieldy, involving over 2,200 men, women, and children. See Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 101.

[20] Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 95. Dalton points out a crucial distinction between the two *satyagrahas*, in that Patel (Bardoli) viewed nonviolence as a tactic to humiliate one's enemy, while Gandhi (Salt March) saw nonviolence as a creed to convert and positively change one's opponent. Ibid., 96.

[21] Shirer, *Gandhi*, 99. It is worth noting that some of Gandhi's most ardent supporters came from the ranks of women and youth, two groups who desired strongly to "show what they can do" in these civil disobedience campaigns. See Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 98.

[22] Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 113.

[23] Dalton sees these as symbols of devotion, simplicity, and strength. He would also add a fourth symbol in that these items were given to Gandhi by his wife, whom he was leaving for this journey and thus he was embodying a spirit of renunciation. Sadly, these same Hindu symbols served to alienate Gandhi from many potential Muslim followers, who refused to join in this campaign of civil disobedience. See Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 109, 121.

violence and whom Providence seems to have sent to me, as it were, for the very purpose."[24]

Along with the explicit symbols associated with the Salt March were the religious and scriptural overtones linked with this entire event. From the traditions of Hinduism, songs were chosen as Gandhi began the march that called to mind the legends of Rama going forth to conquer Sri Lanka. Other witnesses compared Gandhi's journey to Buddha's march of renunciation in search of enlightenment.[25] Intriguingly, the most common religious allusions made by Gandhi were to elements of the Christian religious tradition. During one speech about halfway through the march, Gandhi identified India's starving millions as the "salt of the earth," immediately calling to mind Jesus' use of the phrase in the Sermon on the Mount.[26] To some observers, the procession itself took on characteristics associated with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, including townspeople tossing leaves and flower petals on the roads where Gandhi marched.[27] Lastly, one eyewitness offered a mixed scriptural metaphor to describe the events of 12 May 1930, when Gandhi was finally arrested by the authorities.

> At dead of night, like thieves they came, to steal him away. For, "when they sought to lay hold on him, they feared the multitudes, because they took him for a prophet."[28]

The reference is primarily to the arrest of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, coupled with the biblical language of "thieves in the night" (1 Thess 5:2, Matt 24:43). However the explicit biblical quote comes from Matt 14:5 and the subject of that citation is

---

[24] Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance*, 228; Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 107.
[25] Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 109.
[26] Matt 5:13. Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance*, 253.
[27] There was even a donkey in Gandhi's procession, however he never rode the animal on this journey. See Shirer, *Gandhi*, 95.
[28] Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance*, 276.

actually John the Baptist. One of the reasons why Lord Irwin hesitated to arrest Gandhi was because "the whole of Gandhi's march had been enveloped in a religious atmosphere" and he perceived Gandhi as a genuine man of God.[29]

To conclude this brief consideration of Gandhi's 1930 Salt March, it was an act that can be interpreted from various perspectives, but it had a fundamental religious quality to it. Gandhi himself referred to the march as "a sacred pilgrimage" and insisted that "God is undoubtedly present with His blessings."[30] The explicit choices Gandhi made and the impact his conceivably prophetic act had on both Indian and American history provide excellent points of reference as we now return to the 1955 act of civil disobedience of Rosa Parks.

A core question associated with Rosa Parks concerns the reason why she refused to surrender her bus seat that day. The common explanation given is that she was tired. In responding to that perception, Parks adamantly insists her tiredness was not physical in nature.

> People have said over the years that the reason I did not give up my seat was because I was tired. I did not think of being physically tired. My feet were not hurting. I was tired in a different way. I was tired of seeing so many men treated as boys and not called by their proper names or titles. I was tired of seeing children and women mistreated and disrespected because of the color of their skin. I was tired of Jim Crow laws, of legally enforced racial segregation.[31]

In contrast to any simplistic interpretation of Rosa Parks' refusal to move, at least eighteen different motivating factors can be given that possibly played a part in the events

---

[29] Quote from letter from Lord Irwin to his father. (Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 130-1.)
[30] Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance*, 236, 237.
[31] Rosa Parks with Gregory J. Reed, *Dear Mrs. Parks: A Dialogue With Today's Youth* (New York: Lee & Low Books, 1996), 40-41. A similar quote on this topic can be found in Parks' earlier book *Quiet Strength*: "It is funny to me how people came to believe that the reason that I did not move from my seat was that my feet were tired. I did not hear this until I moved to Detroit in 1957. My feet were not tired, but *I* was tired – tired of unfair treatment." (Rosa Parks with Gregory J. Reed, *Quiet Strength: The Faith, the Hope, and the Heart of a Woman Who Changed a Nation* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994], 25.)

of that day. They will now be briefly described under the categories of political, social, and personal influences.[32]

A. Historical-Political Influences

An initial historical influence on Rosa Parks' act of civil disobedience was the impact *Brown v. Board of Education* had upon all people striving to remove the unfair laws of segregation. This landmark Supreme Court ruling was handed down on 17 May 1954, rejecting the long-held belief that "separate-but-equal" educational programs were constitutional.[33] It prompted a negative backlash among many white southerners; however it gave hope and encouragement to those suffering under racist and prejudicial laws, such as laws requiring segregated bus service.

A second influential historical event occurred about fifteen months later, when an all-white jury acquitted two men accused of the brutal murder of Emmett Till.[34] On 13 August 1955, Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old youth from Chicago, was dared to say "Bye, baby" to a white shopkeeper in Money, Mississippi. He was later reportedly murdered by the woman's husband and a brother-in-law. His mangled body was found with multiple injuries, including a crushed skull, an eye gouged out, a bullet in the brain, and a seventy-five pound weight tied with barbed wire to his neck. Till's mother demanded an open casket funeral in Chicago, which not only led to photographs of Till's distorted face being printed in the media but also brought national and international

---

[32] The following influences upon Rosa Parks have been organized into three categories in order to highlight the distinct, yet interwoven, factors that affected her decision not to vacate her bus seat. The organization of these influences is, to some degree, arbitrary, but it is an attempt to enumerate the factors found in the biographical and autobiographical material associated with Parks.

[33] Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 76-77.

[34] For a fuller description of this incident, see Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 100-102.

criticism of Mississippi's segregationist society. Rosa Parks was well aware of the details of this brutal event. Indeed, the name "Emmett Till" became "a rallying cry for justice and thus for change" in the South.[35]

Another influence involves the activity of the Women's Political Council (WPC) of Montgomery.[36] At first glance, this seems to have been an indirect influence since Rosa Parks was not a member of the group. However the WPC had been in existence since 1946 with its primary focus being the removal of laws of segregation, especially as it involved the bus system. They had been entertaining the idea of a bus boycott for years and had begun shaping concrete plans a few months before the Parks' incident. Further exploration of the links between the WPC and Rosa Parks reveals several important connections. For example, Jo Ann Robinson was the president of the WPC and a professor at Alabama State College in Montgomery. She would take the initiative in the hours immediately after Parks' arrest to prepare flyers for the entire community calling for an immediate bus boycott. She also was a good friend with attorney Fred Gray and the local NAACP president, Mr. E. D. Nixon. By coincidence, on that 1 December day, Rosa Parks had spent her morning coffee break time speaking with the president of Alabama State University, H. Council Trenholm, trying to arrange an NAACP workshop on campus later that week, and then spent her lunch hour helping out in Fred Gray's office.[37] Given such mutual interests of Rosa Parks and the WPC, with its membership of 300 women strongly committed to goals of integration, it would seem likely that Parks

---

[35] Parks, *Quiet Strength*, 26; Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 102.
[36] The primary source of information on the WPC is a memoir by one of its presidents, Jo Ann Gibson Robinson. See Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, ed. David J. Garrow (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 22, 43.
[37] Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 104-5, 122-23.

was aware of, and at least indirectly influenced by, some of the work of Jo Ann Robinson's group.[38]

A fourth historical influence is connected with the stories of the two other African-American women who, in the months prior to Rosa Parks' incident, were arrested for failing to move from their seats when challenged to do so by white bus drivers. There had been many documented cases of people fined or arrested for challenging the Montgomery bus segregation laws, going back to the years immediately following World War II, including the 1952 murder of a man named Brooks, who was reportedly shot by police as he got off a bus after exchanging heated words with the driver.[39] Then, on 2 March 1955, a fifteen-year-old high school student named Claudette Colvin was told to move from her seat in the non-reserved section of the bus, simply to accommodate white passengers with no seat. Colvin refused, so the driver tracked down a policeman and had her arrested on the spot. When Colvin refused to leave the bus quietly, she was forcibly handcuffed and taken away in a patrol car to be charged with several offenses. In the end, because she was a minor, Colvin was found guilty of violating state laws, made to pay a fine, and remanded to her parents' care.[40]

The second case involved an eighteen-year-old girl named Louise Smith, who was arrested for failing to vacate her bus seat. She was sitting in the non-reserved section, but was fined for not obeying the bus driver's request that she move farther back in the bus.

---

[38] Partial confirmation of this theory comes from Parks' autobiography, in which she acknowledges meeting with Jo Ann Robinson and E. D. Nixon to discuss a possible bus boycott after the March 1955 incident involving Claudette Colvin. See Rosa Parks with Jim Haskins, *Rosa Parks: My Story* (New York: Dial Books, 1992), 112.

[39] Robinson, *Montgomery Bus Boycott*, 20-21.

[40] Robinson, *Montgomery Bus Boycott*, 38-42; Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 87-90. Brinkley suggests that two reasons why the Colvin case did not prompt a city-wide bus boycott were because Colvin has a "propensity for curse words and immature outbursts" and that she was discovered to be several months pregnant. (Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 90.)

The NAACP was aware of her case, but did not pursue it as a test case for challenging the segregation laws.[41] Through Rosa Parks' connection with the local branch of the NAACP, these incidents proved to be "trial runs" for envisioning how orchestrated efforts might succeed in removing the unjust laws of segregation laws.

A fifth historical influence concerns the convergence of Parks' involvement with the Montgomery NAACP and the Circuit Court of Appeals ruling of July, 1955 that declared segregated bus seating to be unconstitutional.[42] Some have wondered whether Rosa Parks was prompted by the NAACP local leadership to initiate action against the bus company. However, it is clear from Parks' own comments that such was not the case.

> People have asked me if it occurred to me then that I could be the test case the NAACP had been looking for. I did not think about that at all. In fact if I had let myself think too deeply about what might happen to me, I might have gotten off the bus. But I chose to remain.[43]

It must be conceded, though, that Parks' position as the secretary of the Montgomery branch of the NAACP and her friendship with chapter President E. D. Nixon significantly affected her. When she visited a NAACP meeting in December 1943 and became a full member, the local leadership quickly elected her as secretary of the chapter, primarily because she was the only woman present.[44] One of her principal duties was cataloguing the cases of discrimination and racial violence in their community. This included many instances of lynching, rape, flogging, and unsolved murders. As Parks herself put it, " . . . the more I learned about these incidents, the more I felt I could no longer passively sit by

---

[41] Robinson, *Montgomery Bus Boycott*, 43; Brinkley, 103-4. Again Brinkley suggests that the Smith case was not pursued in court because it was deemed that her family background was not suitable for a possible public trial.
[42] Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 90.
[43] Parks, *My Story*, 116.
[44] Parks, *My Story*, 81; Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 48

and accept the Jim Crow laws. A better day had to come."[45] Also, when the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in July 1955 that segregated bus seating was unconstitutional, considering ways to desegregate the Montgomery buses became an important topic discussed at NAACP meetings at which Parks took all the minutes.[46]

A final political-historical influence to be mentioned here is the crucial impact of Parks' attendance at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. Founded by Myles Horton, the Highlander Folk School strove to gather together integrated groups of people committed to social activism and, in particular, educational reform. In the summer of 1955, a two-week workshop was being held on "Radical Desegregation: Implementing the Supreme Court Decision." Horton called Virginia Foster Durr, about whom more will be said later, to see if she knew of a black Montgomery citizen that might be interested in attending this program. She quickly recommended Rosa Parks and even arranged to find a sponsor to cover her transportation costs.[47]

Parks agreed to attend this workshop, even over the objections of her husband and despite the fact that it required her to take a leave of absence from her employer. She later wrote that it was one of the few experiences of her life when skin color no longer mattered and she "did not feel any hostility from white people."[48] The sense of genuine community and social concern that Parks experienced at Highlander left a strong impression upon her, which she keenly felt once she had to leave that setting and return back home to her job and daily life in segregated Montgomery.

---

[45] Parks, *Quiet Strength*, 21.See also Roxanne Brown, "Mother of the Movement: Nation Honors Rosa Parks with Birthday Observance," *Ebony* 43 (February, 1988): 70, 72.
[46] Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 90.
[47] The sponsor was Aubrey Williams, editor of the *Southern Farmer* magazine. Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 90-95. See also Rosemary L. Bray, "Rosa Parks: A Legendary Moment, a Lifetime of Activism," *Ms.* 6 (Nov/Dec 1995): 46.
[48] Parks, *My Story*, 102; Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 94-95.

Before concluding this section on the political-historical influences upon Rosa Parks, one telling comment deserves to be noted. Parks' biographer, Douglas Brinkley, read through the notes that Parks took while attending the Highlander workshops. There was one particular seminar related to school desegregation that included both informational material and an action guide on how to disseminate the message of integration. At one point, Parks asked herself the following question: "To whom would action be taken toward in first step to integrate?" Her response to the question was "the churches."[49] As will be later demonstrated, amid the various influences and shaping factors that played a part in Rosa Parks' decision not to vacate her bus seat in December 1955, a foundational reality undergirding every aspect of her volition was her church-based, Christian faith.

B. Social and Family Influences

Every person is shaped by the people in her or his life. These influences may be subtle or unconscious, but the priorities modeled by the people we respect (or fear) guide the choices we each make. Rosa Parks often spoke about the women and men she admired and whose example she sought to emulate. These people played a supporting role in the 1955 drama on the Montgomery city bus.

An initial social influence to be mentioned was Rosa Parks' friendship with Virginia and Clifford Durr. Both the Durrs were important white citizens of Montgomery: Clifford, a bookish legal expert and Virginia, an activist for civil rights.[50]

---

[49] Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 95.

[50] Most of the material on Rosa Parks' friendship with Virginia Durr comes from Brinkley's text and Virginia Durr's autobiography. See Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 84-86 and Virginia Foster Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1985).

Through a mutual friend, Virginia Durr was introduced to Rosa Parks, who soon discovered that she was an excellent seamstress and hired her to do alterations on family dresses. Soon the two women spent lots of time together, talking on the Durrs' front porch and even joining together in an integrated prayer group. According to Parks' biography, Virginia Durr was a "mentor to Rosa Parks" and one of the "closest female friends" she had in Montgomery.[51]

A second social influence on Rosa Parks was her inspirational encounter in 1955 with Septima Clark. A former pupil of W. E. B. DuBois, Clark worked with Myles Horton as director of the workshops at the Highlander Folk School. She was a born activist and strong proponent of integration across American society.[52] The Highlander experience of interracial camaraderie coupled with studying with a women of such conviction as Septima Clark had a definite impact on Rosa Parks' worldview and commitment to social justice.

A further social influence on Rosa Parks was her friendship with and admiration for E. D. Nixon, the leader of the local branch of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and one of the founders of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP.[53] Nixon, though largely uneducated, was an outspoken proponent of civil rights. His work as a railroad porter allowed him regularly to visit the integrated northern cities, which only toughened his resolve to end segregation in the southern cities. Parks had known Nixon since 1943, working closely with him as secretary of the local NAACP chapter and advisor for the NAACP Youth Council.[54] She even followed him as his executive secretary when he was

---

[51] Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 85, 86.
[52] Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 96; Parks, *My Story*, 103.
[53] Janet Stevenson, "Rosa Parks Wouldn't Budge," *American Heritage* 23 (Feb 1972): 57
[54] Parks, *My Story*, 73, 94;

elected president of the Progressive Democratic Association of Montgomery; and, as always, she worked for Nixon without compensation.[55] Although Parks would use her one telephone call from jail to speak with her husband and mother at home, it would be Nixon who would arrange for her bail and who, along with Clifford and Virginia Durr, would be the first ones to meet her when she was later released.[56]

In suggesting a fourth influence on Rosa Parks' life and her historic act of civil disobedience, the focus now will shift from social or collegial figures to members of her immediate family, beginning with her brother, Sylvester. One recently-written book for young readers focuses on Rosa Parks' early years and mentions how protective she was of her younger brother, Sylvester.[57] But it was when Sylvester returned from military service in World War II that the hypocrisy and prejudice prevalent in their home community became hard for both siblings to bear. It was not uncommon for black soldiers, who had fought bravely in defense of the United States, to return home to a nation that considered them "uppity" and "troublemakers" if they wore their uniforms in public. As Rosa Parks recalled, "Whites felt that things should remain as they had always been and that the black veterans were getting too sassy. My brother was one who could not take that kind of treatment anymore."[58] Shortly after returning to America in late 1945, Sylvester packed up his wife and two children and moved to Detroit, where he took

---

[55] Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 51, 70. It should be noted that Parks helped Nixon by typing his letters, organizing his calendar, answering his mail as well as serving the NAACP by keeping their financial books and recording every report of racial discrimination that came to their attention. Ibid., 58.
[56] Parks, *My Story*, 121-122; Stevenson, "Rosa Parks Wouldn't Budge," 58.
[57] Kathleen Kudlinski, *Rosa Parks: Young Rebel* (New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 2001). In her autobiography, Parks says, "I was very protective of [Sylvester]. I got more whippings for not telling on things he did than I did for things I did myself. I never did get out of that attitude of trying to be protective of him." (Parks, *My Story*, 21.)
[58] Quoted in Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 65.

a job at a Chrysler factory. The yoke of segregation thus caused some of Parks' closest relatives to flee her home community.

An additional influence on Rosa Parks was the courage she witnessed in her mother, Leona McCauley, and her maternal grandparents.[59] In her book *Quiet Strength*, Parks speaks proudly of her mother's strong moral determination, commitment to education, and emphasis on believing in oneself "even while living under racist conditions."[60] She then mentions how her grandmother, Grandma Rose, was an example of care and love while also being strong-willed and a strict disciplinarian.[61] But then she moves on to the figure of her grandfather, Sylvester Edwards, who was someone that Rosa Parks describes in all her writings as being an influential figure in her life. Born a slave, Sylvester Edwards was light-skinned and dared to break social taboos like shaking hands with whites and calling them by their first names. But the cruelty he had personally experienced in his life made him quite hostile toward whites.[62] He was adamant that his children or grandchildren never work as domestic servants in white households. Parks especially remembers how her grandfather used to guard his home with a loaded, double-barreled shotgun, in case members of the resurgent Ku Klux Klan chose to attack his family. At one point, Parks even makes these telling remarks: "His memory will always

---

[59] In her book, *Quiet Strength*, Rosa Parks wrote: "My family, and the values they taught me, gave me a sense of who I am." (Parks, *Quiet Strength*, 49.) In reference to her father, James McCauley, it should be noted that Rosa was born shortly after her parents married. They were quite poor and her father was often away for months due to his itinerant work as a carpenter and stonemason. He eventually abandoned his young family and did not re-emerge in Rosa's life until she was an adult and married. See Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 15-21 and Parks, *My Story*, 15.

[60] Parks, *Quiet Strength*, 47-48.

[61] Ibid., 48.

[62] Brinkley makes the comment that seeing "her grandfather flout society's race rules gave Rosa McCauley her first taste of overt civil disobedience against discrimination." (Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 22.) See also Parks, *My Story*, 16; Parks, *Quiet Strength*, 49; and Andrea Davis Pinkney, *Let It Shine: Stories of Black Women Freedom Fighters* (San Diego: Gulliver Books, 2000), 78.

be with me. While I do not think I inherited his hostility, my mother and I both learned not to let anyone mistreat us. It was passed down almost in our genes."[63]

A final family influence to be mentioned here was that of Rosa Parks' husband, Raymond. Almost exactly ten years older than Rosa, Raymond was a barber by trade and a charter member of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP. When they were first introduced, Raymond was fixated on bringing about justice for the recently imprisoned Scottsboro Boys.[64] He attended regular meetings of the National Committee to Defend the Scottsboro Boys, even though to do so was to risk being beaten or killed. It is true that Raymond would later be very hesitant to have his wife's defiant act become the spark igniting the Montgomery bus boycott, largely because he feared for her safety. But in the years prior to December 1955, Raymond's commitment to civil rights and active involvement in the NAACP was probably the biggest shaping force in Rosa Parks' evolving spirit of civil disobedience. To quote her directly, Parks said "He was the first man of our race, aside from my grandfather, with whom I actually discussed anything about the racial conditions. He was the first real activist I ever met."[65]

---

[63] Parks, *Quiet Strength*, 49. See also Parks, *Dear Mrs. Parks*, 41.

[64] The Scottsboro case occurred in March 1931 and involved the conviction of eight boys by an all-white jury on charges of raping two white prostitutes on a freight train. The case was in and out of court for six years, at which point four defendants were freed and the rest given lengthy prison sentences. (Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 39-40.)

[65] Parks, *My Story*, 59. When speaking about role models, Parks said, "I believe we all should have people we look up to examples. I list my husband, Raymond Parks, among the persons I admired most. He was a good man, full of courage and inner strength. Before meeting him, I had never really talked about racial

C. Personal Experiences and Character Traits

One difference between describing examples of prophetic activity from the biblical as well as modern eras is that, in the former, the dynamic of psychological motivation is left relatively unexplored. It is one thing to describe an event in impersonal, historical terms; it can be quite another thing to attempt to characterize the emotional and internal influences active in any specific act of volition. Yet, in the case of Rosa Parks, one of the most common questions she has been asked in the intervening years is "Why did you do it?" Her responses, plus comments made by her friends and associates, provide the source material for proposing a number of personal or psychological factors that arguably could be said to have influenced Rosa Parks' act of civil disobedience.

An initial personal influence, and the one that is most commonly mentioned, is that she was physically tired after a busy day of work. This perception has been a part of how people recounted Rosa Parks' act since at least a few years after the incident occurred. It is mentioned in some prominent essays about Rosa Parks that "her feet were tired from a long day's work," or that she was tired from working and decided as an exception to ride the bus home.[66] In recent years, however, Parks has consistently challenged this lingering perception.[67] If physical fatigue was a factor in Parks' decision not to surrender her seat, it was a fairly remote one. It is true that she had worked all day, including a "working lunch" in the office of attorney Fred Gray, and she was anxious to get home to rest for a brief period before leading the regular Thursday evening NAACP

---

issues with another African-American, outside of my family." (Parks, *Quiet Strength*, 46.) See also Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 38-42.

[66] Stevenson, "Rosa Parks Wouldn't Budge," 56; Eloise Greenfield, "Rosa Parks" *Ms.* 3 (August 1974): 72. Parks herself has commented: "It is funny to me how people came to believe that the reason that I did not move from my seat was that my feet were tired. I did not hear this until I moved to Detroit in 1957. My feet were not tired, but I was tired – tired of unfair treatment." (Parks, *Quiet Strength*, 25.)

[67] Cf. n. 29 with quote from Parks, *Dear Mrs. Parks*, 40-41.

Youth Council meeting.[68] But on that particular day, it was clear that she was burdened by something much weightier than physical weariness.

Another personal influence was the disparity Parks experienced between two different bus systems in her own community. In 1941, Parks got a job at Maxwell Field, a nearby Army Air Corps base.[69] On the U.S. military base itself, she rode on an integrated trolley, often sitting side by side with white colleagues and enjoying conversation together. Once she left the base, however, she was forced to ride on segregated city buses. Parks considered this discrepancy to be a personal "humiliation" and insists that the experience opened her eyes by showing her "an alternative reality to the ugly racial policies of Jim Crow."[70]

A third personal influence is a quality of Rosa Parks that is frequently mentioned by those who know her well, that is, a steely quality of inner strength. The co-author of Rosa Parks' book, *Quiet Strength*, summarizes her character as being one of "quiet courage, dignity, and determination."[71] Virginia Durr commented that what impressed her the most, when she witnessed Parks being released from jail, was "how tranquil Rosa Parks remained, the epitome of grace under pressure."[72] Her long-time associate, Elaine Steele, has remarked that Parks is a person that is very peaceful but with great power.

> She can very quietly say 'no' or 'I prefer not,' and you know instinctively that that is the bottom line. I think that's the way the bus driver must have felt on that

---

[68] Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 114.
[69] The only sources that seem to highlight this factor are Parks' autobiography (Parks, *My Story*, 65) and Brinkley's biography (Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 42-43).
[70] Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 43. Brinkley also suggests that this experience, coupled with a desire to get registered to vote, prompted Parks to join the NAACP.
[71] Parks with Gregory Reed, *Quiet Strength*, 14.
[72] Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 114.

> particular day when he asked 'Are you going to move?' and she said 'No, I am not.' He didn't have to debate the point any further.[73]

Rosa Parks herself acknowledges the truth behind these perceptions.

> Perhaps my only "secret" is my attitude toward life. Because I have such high ideals, I feel strongly when they are violated in the world around me. I do not like to see people treated in a way I would not want to be treated. Whenever I see this happening, I do everything in my power to help the cause.[74]

Along with Parks' inner strength, a fourth personal influence was her strong sense of pride. One minor incident points this out. When Parks accepted the scholarship to attend the Highlander Folk School, she supposedly accepted luggage and a swimsuit from Virginia Durr; however, she disputes this detail in her autobiography, *My Story*. Durr responded in her own book, saying:

> Rosa Parks is one of the proudest people I've ever known in my life. She hated to admit that she didn't have a suitcase or bathing suit or money. It was painful for her. She was a very proud woman, so all of this had to be accomplished with a great deal of tact, which I am not noted for.[75]

While learning about self-pride from her mother and grandparents, Parks also gives credit to Miss Alice Winter, one of her schoolteachers at the Montgomery Industrial School. Parks comments that she learned at Miss White's school that she was "a person with dignity and self-respect" and that she should not set her sights lower than anybody else just because of her race.[76]

As an offshoot of this strong sense of pride, an additional personal influence was the fact that Rosa Parks had a lingering resentment toward James F. Blake, the bus driver

---

[73] Brown, "Mother of the Movement," 72. Another friend of Rosa Parks, Roberta Hughes Wright, commented with laughter, "She's quiet – the way steel is quiet... She seems almost meek, but we already know the truth of that, don't we?" (Bray, "Rosa Parks: Legendary Moment, Lifetime of Activism," 46-47.)
[74] Parks, *Quiet Strength*, 70-71.
[75] Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 93; citing Virginia Durr's text *Outside the Magic Circle.*
[76] Parks, *My Story*, 49.

who confronted her on 1 December 1955. She did not know him personally; she did not even learn his name until her subsequent trial.[77] But they had already had an unfortunate encounter twelve years prior.[78] To understand this earlier incident, some of the arcane rules of bus segregation need to be summarized. Most Montgomery city buses had thirty-six seats in them, with the first ten reserved for whites, the rear ten reserved for blacks, and the remaining sixteen available for both races, yet allocated under the jurisdiction of a pistol-carrying bus driver. One sad feature of segregation was the habit of many bus drivers to require black passengers to pay for their ticket at the front of the bus, before disembarking and re-boarding at the rear of the bus. James Blake had a reputation for being especially abusive toward African-American women, as well as taking malicious pleasure in having African-American passengers buy their tickets up front, but then leaving them stranded before they could re-board at the rear.

One November day in 1943, Rosa Parks boarded a bus through the front door and moved to stand in the aisle in the appropriate section in the rear. She had done this because there was no way to enter the bus from the rear, since every seat and place in the stairwell and aisle were already full in the back of the bus. James Blake was the driver that day and demanded that she exit immediately. When she refused, he told her to get off of "his" bus. Parks refused to move. Blake stood up and began pulling on her coat sleeve. She warned him not to strike her and said that she would leave. However, she further infuriated Blake by intentionally dropping her purse near the front of the bus and briefly sitting in a "whites only" seat before finally exiting the bus. For the next dozen years, Parks consciously avoided riding in any bus driven by Blake. The fact that Blake was the

---

[77] Ibid., 116.
[78] Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 57-60; Parks, *My Story*, 77-79.

precipitator of the famous incident of 1955 was only possible because she had neglected to notice who was driving the bus when it stopped to pick up passengers near Parks' place of work. And her act of civil disobedience was surely influenced by a long-remembered sense of moral outrage felt toward James Blake.

A sixth, and, in my opinion, the most important influence affecting Rosa Parks' decision not to move from her bus seat, was her deeply rooted, sincere Christian faith. Invariably, when Parks is asked about the events that day, she uses language that is faith-based and confessional in nature.[79] A schoolgirl from Detroit wrote to Parks, asking what gave her the courage to say "No" and not move to the back of the bus. She replied with these two paragraphs:

> God has always given me the strength to say what is right. I did not get on the bus to get arrested; I got on the bus to go home. Getting arrested was one of the worst days in my life. It was not a happy experience. Since I have always been a strong believer in God, I knew that He was with me, and only He could get me through the next step.
>
> I had no idea that history was being made. I was just tired of giving in. Somehow, I felt that what I did was right by standing up to that bus driver. I did not think about the consequences. I knew that I could have been lynched, manhandled, or beaten when the police came. I chose not to move, because I was right. When I made that decision, I knew that I had the strength of God and my ancestors with me.[80]

According to her biographer, Douglas Brinkley, "faith in God was never the question for Rosa Parks; it was the answer."[81]

---

[79] It is this quality of Rosa Parks' life and activism for civil rights that her biographers most often neglect. In a review for the New York Times of Brinkley's book, Michael Anderson argues that Brinkley "substitutes a saccharine piousness for spiritual empathy; the simplicity of Parks' life, faith and commitment defeat him." (Michael Anderson, review of *Rosa Parks*, by Douglas Brinkley, *The New York Times Book Review*, 16 July 2000, 31.) Her faith receives little mention in the previously cited articles by Eloise Greenfield, Janet Stevenson, Rosemary Bray, and Roxanne Brown. Yet it is especially prominent throughout Parks' books *Dear Mrs. Parks* and *Quiet Strength.*

[80] Parks, *Dear Mrs. Parks*, 42. Much of this passage is also quoted in *Quiet Strength*, 23-24.

[81] Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 14.

By all accounts, Parks was a devoted and faithful member of her church, St. Paul A.M.E. Church. She has belonged to the African Methodist Episcopal denomination all her life and is proud of the A.M.E. tradition of abolitionism.[82] Parks insists that she always has enjoyed going to worship services and has found much "comfort and peace" while studying the Bible.[83] In her own words:

> My strength has always come from the church. I have always gained strength from thinking about the Bible and from the faith of my family. Church has always been a place where we can turn to God for rest and encouragement. It lifts the spirit and helps us to go on.[84]

This quality of Christian faith expressed in worship, service, and activism was arguably one of the strongest personal influences shaping Rosa Parks' 1955 act of civil disobedience.

What is the significance of this survey of possible influences shaping Rosa Parks' decision not to surrender her bus seat? Although this question will be more fully addressed in the concluding chapter, a succinct response can be offered at this time. When one studies the material from the Hebrew scriptures in a historical-critical manner, a key element in the exegetical process has already occurred even before one starts. This is because the description of prophetic activity found in the canonical book of Jeremiah, for instance, comes to us in a redacted form. The material has been edited and shaped according to implicit criteria related to authenticating Jeremiah as a prophetic figure and presenting his messages as valid expressions of the word and will of God for the Judahite community. As readers of these scriptures, we are not given "raw" historical data. While speculation may occur as to whether the material can even be traced back to an actual

---

[82] Parks, *Quiet Strength*, 32.
[83] Ibid., 54.
[84] Ibid., 70.

figure named Jeremiah, the best that can be said with confidence is that contemporary readers are given a collection of writings that the Hebrew faith community has long chosen to associate with someone named Jeremiah.

This is quite different from the dynamics associated with any consideration of modern prophetic acts. While redaction of contemporary historical events can and does occur, any exegetes or witnesses of such events are active participants in making determinations about the significance of such activity. They can seek out first-person accounts, read biographical material, interview witnesses, and reach conclusions based on varying degrees of critical research. Also, a significant difference is the fact that no modern or contemporary prophetic act is communicated with anything nearly as definitive as the imprimatur of canonicity that has been given to comparable scriptural material. Moreover, the question of "Why did she or he do that?" will always be asked in reference to modern prophetic acts with the expectation that an answer can be discovered; by comparison, this question can only be answered in a speculative fashion in reference to biblical prophetism. Therefore, it is prudent to explore the various influences associated with the volitional and decision-making process leading up to specific prophetic acts of modern figures. Far from secularizing or demythologizing the category of contemporary prophetism, such in-depth, historical-critical, psychological, and sociological examination of modern acts called prophetic helps, not only to render judgment as to their authenticity and efficacy, but possibly also to shed light on what may have been involved in corollary prophetic examples from the Hebrew scriptures.

D. Evaluating the Prophetic Quality of Rosa Parks' Act

We now attempt a provisional evaluation of whether Rosa Parks' act of civil disobedience should be considered a modern prophetic act. This question will be approached from four perspectives. First, her prophetic act will be compared with the fourfold rhetorical paradigm put forth by Kelvin Friebel. Second, it will be asked whether her act has a particular *kairos* quality to it. Third, we will consider whether Parks' act reflects an ethical perspective of moral relativism or moral realism. Fourth, her act will be examined in light of the paradigmatic examples of ancient Hebrew prophetic activity and the working definition of prophetic activity already discussed in this dissertation.

Friebel's list of traits associated with rhetorical, prophetic communication was presented in Chapter Two. He stressed that persuasive prophetic communication must 1) capture an audience's attention, 2) be readily comprehended, 3) be able to be remembered and re-told, and 4) provide an incentive for an alteration in behaviors or attitudes.[85] The historical and anecdotal evidence associated with Rosa Parks' act suggests that it can be evaluated positively in terms of all four of these traits. The act of refusing to move from her bus seat definitely caught the attention of the bus driver and all the other passengers, both because of the nature and quality of Parks' defiance. For example, when James Blake threatened Parks that she would be arrested, her measured response was "You may do that," identifying her not as a passive victim but as an active protester of the bus segregation laws.[86] That the severity of the act was readily apparent and easily comprehended is seen in how Blake immediately called for two policemen to

---

[85] Kelvin Friebel, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts* (Sheffield: JSOT Supplement Series 283, 1999), 74-75.
[86] Parks, *My Story*, 116.

come and arrest Parks. According to testimony gathered by Brinkley, the witnesses to Parks' self-possessed act "sat in stunned, silent recognition that this time the authorities had picked the wrong woman to mess with."[87] These same witnesses were able to provide accurate descriptions of what transpired that day, enabling a broad retention of the details and facts associated with the event. Lastly, the widespread reaction to Parks' arrest (especially among those who personally knew her) was one of anger, frustration, and a renewed commitment to work for change, so that such painful incidents would not happen again in their community.

Is it possible to speak about what Tillich calls a *kairos* moment occurring on that December day? In Brinkley's biography, one recurrent question is whether or not Parks' actions were premeditated. In his opinion, the answer is a clear "No." As he puts it, a "lifetime's education in injustice – from her grandfather's nightly vigils to the murder of Emmett Till – had strengthened her resolve to act when the time came."[88] Martin Luther King, Jr. echoed these sentiments in his book *Stride Toward Freedom*, when he said that Rosa Parks

> was anchored to that seat by the accumulated indignities of days gone and the boundless aspirations of generations yet born. She was a victim of both the forces of history and the forces of destiny. She had been tracked down by the *Zeitgeist*- the spirit of the time.[89]

Although she never uses the specific term *kairos*, this sense of the "fullness of time" is present in Parks' own summary of her action: "God provided me with the strength I

---

[87] Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 108.

[88] Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 109. Parks herself comments: "There had to be a stopping place, and this seemed to have been the place for me to stop being pushed around and to find out what human rights I had, if any." (Ibid., 110.) Also, in her book *Quiet Strength*, she says, "It was time for someone to stand up – or in my case, sit down. I refused to move." (Parks, *Quiet Strength*, 17-18.)

[89] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 424. Quoted in Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 141.

needed at the precise time when conditions were ripe for change." Knowing that other women at other times had reacted to bus segregation in the same way as she had, but without it leading to an effective, enduring bus boycott, Parks came to recognize a kairotic quality to the events associated with her prophetic act that day.[90]

Remembering the earlier discussion of the work of William Schweiker, did Rosa Parks' act of civil disobedience reflect an ethics of moral relativism or moral realism? Once again, this question involves vocabulary that is foreign to Parks' experience and autobiographical writings. In describing her motivations for refusing to surrender her bus seat, however, Parks' invariably comments on a strong sense of high ideals and having a commitment to doing what is ethically right. She would ground this perspective in her faith in God, trusting in God to provide the strength to act on her convictions. At the close of her book, *Dear Mrs. Parks*, comes one of the clearest statements indicating that her ethical position is not relativistic.

> My message to the world is that we must come together and live as one. There is only one world, and yet we, as a people, have treated the world as if it were divided. We cannot allow the gains we have made to erode. Although we have a long way to go, I do believe that we can achieve Dr. King's dream of a better world.
>
> From time to time, I catch glimpses of that world. . . . I can see a world free of acts of violence. I can see a world in which people of all races and all religions work together to improve the quality of life for everyone. I can see this world because it exists today in small pockets of this country and in a small pocket of every person's heart. If we will look to God and work together – not

[90] Parks, *Quiet Strength*, 38. Consider also the lines from Rita Dove's poem "Rosa", which say, "How she sat there,/ the time right inside a place/ so wrong it was ready." (Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, vii.) It is appropriate to acknowledge, however, that *kairos* moments most commonly come into focus through the reporting and recollection that follow seminal events. What is often too immediately present at the moment of its occurrence is always better understood and appreciated with the passage of time and after gaining a degree of historic objectivity. Rosemary Bray described this process in this way: "a heroic action, taken not for glory's sake but because a personal limit has been reached, becomes in the telling and the retelling a moment of great awareness and decision." (Bray, "Rosa Parks: Legendary Moment, Lifetime of Activism," 46.)

> only here, but everywhere – then others will see this world, too, and help to make it a reality.[91]

Finally, can comparisons be drawn between Parks' act of civil disobedience and the biblical examples of prophetism analyzed earlier? Recalling the prophetic acts of Jeremiah surveyed earlier, the first two acts involved specific objects (waistcloth, ceramic flask) that were manipulated in unusual ways to make theological points. The last two acts involved deeds done in secret (stones of Tahpanhes, scroll thrown into the Euphrates) that gave warnings about possible future consequences that would befall the leadership of foreign powers (Egypt and Babylon). The middle two incidents, recorded in Jeremiah 27-28 and Jeremiah 32, bear the closest analogy to Rosa Parks' prophetic act.

On the surface, there appears to be little point of comparison between Jeremiah's insistence on continued submission to the yoke of Babylon and Parks' refusal to submit to continued oppression under the segregation laws of Montgomery. However, the similarity between them has less to do with the actual act than it does with the concomitant isolation endured by both Jeremiah and Parks. Jeremiah's public act stood in stark contrast to the dominant mindset that the Babylonian hegemony should be challenged and, if possible, overthrown. The king, the ambassadors from other nations, the priests and people of Judah, and the prophet Hananiah himself were all supporters of this political position. Jeremiah alone came forward, wearing an ox-yoke as a symbol of how God ordained continued submission to Babylonian authority.

Whenever Rosa Parks relates the details of her act of defiance, it is clear that she acted contrary to the wishes of the presiding authority (i.e., bus driver, policemen), the empowered audience (i.e., white passengers), and even her own community (i.e., African-

---

[91] Parks, *Dear Mrs. Parks*, 99-100.

American passengers). Parks was one of four passengers in her row on the bus; the other three vacated their seats when told to do so by James Blake. This effectively isolated Parks as the center of the conflict.[92] Once she refused to move, many of her peers left the bus or asked for transfers, out of a desire to avoid a confrontation.

Parks' act was an inconvenience to her entire "audience": to the bus driver, whose route was disrupted; to the white passengers, whose trip home was delayed; to the policemen, who would have to fill out extensive paperwork over a seemingly insignificant incident; and to the black passengers, of whom some felt they were put at unnecessary risk by one woman's stubbornness. Parks has commented how alone she felt on the bus and later when arrested by the police.

> There were other people on the bus whom I knew. But when I was arrested, not one of them came to my defense. I felt very much alone. One man who knew me did not even go by my house to tell my husband I had been arrested. Everyone just went on their way. In jail I felt even more alone. For a moment, as I sat in that little room with bars, before I was moved to a cell with two other women, I felt that I had been deserted.[93]

This description could be interpreted as mirroring the isolation felt by the prophet Jeremiah, both in his act of prophetism before King Zedekiah and his time of rebuke following the breaking of his wooden yoke by the prophet Hananiah.

Perhaps the better analogy between Parks and Jeremiah comes when comparisons are made between her prophetic act and Jeremiah's decision to purchase the field in Anathoth. As has been mentioned, making this land purchase during a time of enemy siege was considered dangerous and foolhardy. It created the appearance that Jeremiah was in league with the Babylonians, hoping to retain possession of the land once the

---

[92] In her biography, Parks comments that "if the other three had stayed where they were, . . . they'd had to arrest four of us instead of one, [which] would have given me a little support." (Parks, *My Story*, 117.)
[93] Parks, *Quiet Strength*, 24.

invading army conquered Jerusalem. As such, Jeremiah's prophetic act was done at great personal risk. The same could be said of Parks' prophetic act. By refusing to move, her widely known reputation as an upright citizen of Montgomery was now at risk of being forever redefined as that of a questionable troublemaker. In the aftermath of her act, Parks received a barrage of death threats.[94] She went against her husband's wishes by her willingness to become a public figure, enduring his repeated warning, "Rosa, the white folks will kill you. Rosa, the white folks will kill you."[95] Her act led directly to her losing her job and her husband's resignation from his barber's job.[96] She also knew that she was endangering her entire family, including her frail mother. Yet she agreed to make her legal case a means to challenge the unjust status quo.

Parks' act and Jeremiah's purchase of the Anathoth field are similar in being prophetic acts of hope in times of crisis. Both involved ordinary activities (the buying and selling of land, riding home from work on public transportation) whose "ordinariness" belied the crisis settings at hand (siege of Jerusalem, Montgomery's laws of segregation). Buying a field became a means to embody a promise that one day, "houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" (Jer 32:15b). Similarly, refusing to be coerced to vacate a solitary bus seat became a means to embody a social vision that no longer allowed rules about a person's skin color to dictate whether a wide array of services or common courtesies will be offered. Both acts took a present event to show forth a possible future reality. And both acts took place out of a foundation of communal faith and religious conviction, including the belief that God would have it be so.

---

[94] Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 2; Parks, *Quiet Strength*, 26-27.
[95] Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 114.
[96] Bray, "Rosa Parks: Legendary Moment, Lifetime of Activism," 46; Parks, *My Story*, 142, Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 145.

In conclusion, Rosa Parks' civil disobedience fits the working definition of prophetic acts already outlined. It was a deliberate and specific nonverbal act, performed by a person actively grounded in a faith community. It was communicative and interactive, preceded by a sense of divine presence and call, and followed by interpretative acts (i.e., a bus boycott) meant to transform perceptions and practices within human social reality.

Before leaving the story of Rosa Parks, one final moment of prophetic irony deserves to be mentioned. The Montgomery bus boycott lasted for thirteen months, until late December, 1956 when the Supreme Court rejected the segregationist position of the Montgomery City Commission and ordered that by 20 December, all the buses be integrated by law. At 9:00 a.m. on 21 December 1956, a reporter and photographer from *Look* magazine knocked on Rosa Parks' door and persuaded her to have her picture taken riding a bus on that first day of integration. The famous subsequent photograph, showing Rosa Parks glancing out a window with a white male passenger sitting in the row behind her, happened to be taken on a bus driven that day by James Blake.[97]

III. The Letter Written From the Birmingham City Jail

In the early 1960s, Birmingham was the largest city in Alabama, boasting a population of over 350,000. Although African Americans accounted for forty percent of the city's population, it was a city characterized as the most "intransigent citadel of segregation."[98] Birmingham, if not violently opposed to change, was a city that often

---

[97] Brinkley, *Rosa Parks*, 170-71; Anderson, review of Brinkley's *Rosa Parks*, 31. For full historical disclosure, the white "passenger" on the bus was actually the *Look* reporter.

[98] E. Culpepper Clark, "The American Dilemma in King's 'Letter from Birmingham Jail,' in *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, ed. Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John Louis

chose to respond to change with violence. A string of unsolved dynamite attacks between 1957 and 1963 had earned it the nickname of "Bombingham." It was here in early 1963 that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. focused the energy of the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) in pursuing the cause of integration.[99]

If Rosa Parks' act of civil disobedience is too well-known in its flawed mythic version, the details surrounding King's decision to go to jail in Birmingham are not well-known at all; this obscures, I believe, the full prophetic import of King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." This letter is recognized as a powerful document and a stirring reflection on the necessity of civil disobedience. It is included in anthologies and read as part of contemporary history classes' curricula. Yet just as Rosa Parks' story is diminished by being told without taking seriously the issues of racism and Parks' intentional commitment to social justice, so too is the power of King's letter diminished when it is read in isolation from the events that prompted its composition in that solitary confinement cell over the Easter holiday in 1963.

When King's letter is discussed, comparisons are commonly made between it and a prior document, namely, Henry David Thoreau's 1849 essay "Civil Disobedience."[100] It

---

Lucaites (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 37. Also, Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years 1954-1965* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 181.

[99] David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 199-200, 232; Martin Luther King, Jr. *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet Books, 1964), 49.

[100] Thoreau's essay was originally titled "Resistance to Civil Government," but it has come to be better known by its later and more succinct title "Civil Disobedience." The one other letter that is frequently mentioned in connection with King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is Emile Zola's 1898 "J'accuse." The significant differences are that Zola was not in jail when he wrote "J'accuse" in support of the imprisoned Alfred Dreyfus, and Zola's letter does not delineate a political position as much as it challenges a series of actions taken by the French government against a Jewish military officer. However, the following texts do suggest the similarities between King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and Zola's "J'accuse": S. Jonathan Bass, *Blessed are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King, Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the "Letter from Birmingham Jail"* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 147; James A. Colaiaco, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Apostle of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988),

is appropriate to consider briefly this other example of protest literature, so that the question of historical precedence can be explored. In 1845, the 28-year old Thoreau retired to live "essentially" beside the banks of Walden Pond. In July 1846, he went into town to get a shoe from the cobbler, when he was arrested for refusing to pay a required, nine shilling poll tax. The reason for this defiant act, according to Thoreau, was because he did not "recognize the authority of the State which buys and sells men, women, and children, like cattle, at the door of its senate-house."[101]

What is summarized in five sentences in *Walden* Thoreau later fleshes out into a significant essay on civil disobedience centered on the one night he spent in the Concord jail. One commentator suggests that during the months immediately prior to the Thoreau's arrest, he was focusing in on the material that would become the crucial second chapter of *Walden*, entitled "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For."[102] It is here that Thoreau states: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."[103] It is this same idea that shaped his resistance to the obligation of paying the poll tax:

> Wherever a man goes, men will pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions, and, if they can, constrain him to belong to their desperate odd-fellow society. It is true, I might have resisted forcibly with more or less effect, might have run

---

77; Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 244.

[101] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden or, Life in the Woods and On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* (New York: Signet Classics, 1960), 118. Thoreau was not the first American to be arrested for protesting American policies through the withholding of federal taxes. Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane were both jailed in the years immediately prior for the same reason as Thoreau. Yet like the Bardoli satyagraha before Gandhi's Salt March, or the other women arrested for challenging the laws of bus segregation before Rosa Parks' act of defiance, a combination of events one could almost describe as kairotic has led historians to focus in on Thoreau's extraordinary act.

[102] Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 172.

[103] Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, 66.

> "amok" against society; but I preferred that society should run "amok" against me, it being the desperate party.[104]

The similarities and differences between the histories of Thoreau's essay and King's letter emerge when one compares both the substance of each text and the particularities of each act of composition. In terms of differences, this was Thoreau's first and only experience in jail, and it lasted for just one day. King's incarceration was the twelfth of his career and it lasted for over a week. Thoreau apparently did not do any writing while in jail, choosing to spend his time either reading or in conversation with his cellmate. King was kept in solitary confinement, yet he did manage to compose the bulk of his letter while under arrest. However, both authors write powerfully in the first person. Both quote extensively in their essays from other sources, often having to do so from memory. Both ponder the difficult question of whether unjust laws should be obeyed until amended or transgressed at once to provoke change.[105]

There is a direct relationship between the respective documents of Thoreau and King: the former is definitely an influential precursor for the latter.[106] In his book *Stride Toward Freedom*, King candidly admits this fact:

> I began to think about Thoreau's *Essay on Civil Disobedience*. I remembered how, as a college student, I had been moved when I first read this work. I became convinced that what we were preparing to do in Montgomery was related to what

---

[104] Ibid., 118.

[105] Ibid., 228. King, "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" in *A Testament of Hope*, 293-95. Two other minor similarities could also be mentioned: Thoreau and King were both in their late 20s (29 and 27 respectively), and both won their release when their jail bond was paid by someone else.

[106] Ultimately the stronger candidate for precursor of King's letter is the apostle Paul, given his various letters written from prison settings. However Thoreau's influence on both King and Gandhi is well documented. For example, when King first read Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience," he was quite taken by the idea of refusing to cooperate with unjust systems. And when Gandhi was fighting for Indian rights in South Africa, he became acquainted with this same essay and borrowed the title of Thoreau's work as the name for his entire "civil disobedience" movement. (Meltzer and Harding, *A Thoreau Profile*, 166.) King also quotes Thoreau in the essay "The American Dream" (*Testament of Hope*, 211), in the sermon "Antidotes for Fear" (*Testament of Hope*, 512), and in his book, *Where Do We Go From Here?* (*Testament of Hope*, 620).

> Thoreau had expressed. We were simply saying to the white community, "We can no longer lend our cooperation to an evil system."[107]

Though the fundamental issues to which the essays are addressed differ, they share a common conviction that at times one best serves the State with a clear conscience by resisting the State.[108]

When Rosa Parks' prophetic act was considered earlier, the various influences affecting her decision not to move from her bus seat were briefly described. While a similar approach could be followed in considering the prophetic nature of King's decision to be arrested in Birmingham, what is perhaps more helpful in this case is to summarize some of the barriers (both political and social) King had to overcome. Many negative influences and obstacles made King hesitant to agree to march on 11 April 1963. But by refusing to be dissuaded from a course of action that he believed to be right and just, King set in motion a series of events that led to his arrest and to the composition of his prophetic essay against the flawed practice of racial segregation.

A. Political Barriers Overcome By King

Martin Luther King, Jr. had called Birmingham a "colossus of segregation," believing that a victory in that city "would radiate across the South, cracking the whole edifice of discrimination."[109] Yet one of the first barriers he had to overcome in order to place himself in a position to be thrown into the Birmingham jail was the reality of the

---

[107] King, *Stride Toward Freedom* in *A Testament of Hope*, 429.
[108] Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, 224. One King scholar, James Hanigan, argues that Thoreau's "civil disobedience was basically a private act done to safeguard the integrity of his own conscience, [while] King saw civil disobedience as an instrument of social change . . . aimed at the integrity of society's conscience." (James P. Hanigan, *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Foundations of Nonviolence* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 249.) In my opinion, Hanigan privatizes Thoreau's position too severely in his effort to contrast the social-political philosophies of these two figures.
[109] Coretta Scott King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Holt and Company, 1993), 216.

weakened overall state of the SCLC as it prepared to challenge this southern city "colossus." The organization under King's leadership had just suffered its first serious setback in its 1962 effort to challenge the segregation laws in Albany, Georgia. That campaign had begun with a Freedom Ride in December 1961.[110] But after a lengthy series of marches, sit-ins, prayer vigils, and demonstrations, little significant change had been accomplished.[111] The recent failure to achieve the movement's general goals of desegregation (especially involving transportation services and lunch counters) in Albany, coupled with rising voices arguing that "nonviolence as a social issue was dead" presented serious obstacles as King planned "Project C" (for confrontation) in Birmingham.[112]

The preceding comment about the predicted demise of nonviolence campaigns was a sentiment oft repeated by the national media, whose hostility toward King's efforts in Birmingham was another serious barrier to be surmounted. Headlines in *Time* magazine spoke about King's "Poorly Timed Protest," while articles argued that he was an outsider intent on inflaming "tensions at a time when the city seemed to be making some progress, however small, in race relations."[113] Other sources as varied as *Newsweek*, *U.S. News*, and the *Washington Post* strongly questioned King's overall

---

[110] "Freedom Rides" were organized bus trips, in which both black and white passengers would travel through the Southern states in violation of their laws of segregation for modes of transportation.

[111] Lerone Bennett, Jr. *What Manner of Man: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1976), 129-31; Colaiaco, *Apostle of Nonviolence*, 78; Clark, "The American Dilemma," 36-37. When King himself reflected on the Albany experience, he would use the language of the movement being "checked but not defeated," and then go on to mention the lessons learned and modest civil rights' goals accomplished. (King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 42-45.)

[112] "Project C" sought to change the laws of segregation in Birmingham through protest marches and boycotts, but it also had six explicit goals: desegregation of store facilities; adopting fair hiring practices; dismissing charges from previous protests; equal employment opportunities for blacks with the city government; reopening and desegregating municipal recreation facilities; and establishing a biracial committee to pursue further desegregation. See Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 237.

[113] Richard Lentz, *Symbols, the News Magazines, and Martin Luther King* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 80. (Headline in *Time*, 19 April 1963).

strategy in Birmingham and in some cases painted him as a dangerous, polarizing extremist.[114] King himself admits how the hostile national press made his work in Birmingham immensely more difficult:

> In Montgomery, during the bus boycott, and in the Albany, Georgia, campaign, we had had the advantage of a sympathetic and understanding national press from the outset. In Birmingham we did not. It is terribly difficult to wage such a battle without the moral support of the national press to counteract the hostility of local editors. The words "bad timing" came to be ghosts haunting our every move in Birmingham. Yet people who used this argument were ignorant of the background of our planning. They did not know we had postponed our campaign twice. . . . Above all they did not realize that it was ridiculous to speak of timing when the clock of history showed that the Negro had already suffered one hundred years of delay.[115]

The primary reason why King was accused of "bad timing" and, consequently, a third barrier he had to overcome in planning the Birmingham campaign was the false sense of optimism associated with an imminent change in the city government. In November 1962, Birmingham voters rejected the old commission form of government in favor of a mayor and council structure. Much of the energy behind this reform was an effort to get rid of commissioner (and later mayoral candidate) Theophilus Eugene "Bull" Connor. King initially delayed the Birmingham campaign until after the 5 March election, but had to delay the campaign a second time when the election failed to produce a clear winner. At that time, hopes were raised when moderate segregationist Albert Boutwell defeated Bull Connor in the mayoral runoff election on 2 April. White moderates and many members of the black community believed that prospects looked good for quickening the pace of interracial progress.[116] But King and leaders in the

---

[114] Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 737.
[115] King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 66.
[116] Clark, "The American Dilemma," 38.

Birmingham campaign argued that Boutwell was "just a dignified Bull Connor."[117] King also pointed to the fact that Connor was still in power through a court-sanctioned technicality that allowed him to complete his term as "Commissioner of Public Safety" and lead a city commission that functioned in parallel with Boutwell's group. In the eyes of many others, however, all of King's efforts were flawed because they did not acknowledge what tremendous strides had taken place in replacing Connor with Boutwell in the first place.[118]

Another barrier facing King was the slow start he had witnessed in the overall Birmingham campaign. During the first eight days of the effort, fewer than 150 people had been jailed; when by comparison, nearly twice that number had been jailed in Albany on the first day of protest in that much smaller community.[119] The press had picked up on this lack of momentum and, based on the numbers active in the campaign, had begun routinely questioning whether King's agenda had the full support of the region's over 100,000 African American citizens.[120] King himself was keenly aware of the "tremendous resistance" to his campaign that was coming from a large sector of the African American business professionals and ministers. He also knew that there was widespread resentment from local activists due to a lack of communication when planning strategy and organizing events. Yet, as he put it, "somehow God gave me the power to transform the resentments, the suspicions, the fears and the misunderstanding I

---

[117] Phrase attributed to the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth. King, "Why We Can't Wait," 59; Williams, *Eyes on the Prize,* 183.
[118] White lawyer David Vann was upset with King for not allowing the local political process to move towards reform at its own pace. Vann expressed his position this way: "A year and a day after Connor had been reelected with the largest vote in history, a majority of the people in this city voted to terminate his office. And when he ran for mayor, we rejected him." (Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 183-84.)
[119] Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 727-28.
[120] Ralph David Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: An Autobiography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 245.

found that week into faith and enthusiasm. . . .With the new unity that developed and now poured fresh blood into our protest, the foundations of the old order were doomed."[121]

The fifth and sixth barriers facing King as he considered being thrown into jail in Birmingham were clearly the most troubling political factors he confronted. The fifth obstacle came in the form of a court injunction issued on Wednesday, 10 April 1963, which expressly forbade King and 132 other civil rights leaders from taking part in any marches, sit-ins, or demonstrations.[122] This order from Alabama Circuit Court Judge William A. Jenkins now meant any action by King would involve defying both local law enforcement authorities and the state court.[123] To contravene this injunction would mark the first time King or his group had officially defied a court order. It was a highly charged moment in the Birmingham campaign. When the deputy sheriff came to the Gaston Motel to present King with the court order, a group of reporters huddled nearby behind their cameras and microphones anxious for his response.[124] In his public remarks, King stated emphatically that they "were not anarchists advocating lawlessness, but that it was obvious to us that the courts of Alabama had misused the judicial process in order to perpetuate injustice and segregation."[125] Despite such a strong verbal statement,

---

[121] King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 68.
[122] Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 184.
[123] Abernathy goes on to suggest that this injunction showed how both the City of Birmingham and the State of Alabama were working together to block movements toward racial integration. This fact is also evident in the state decision to raise bail prices in Birmingham alone, which will be discussed as part of the sixth political barrier King faced. (Abernathy, *Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 246.) It is also worthy of mention to note how this injunction acted as a formidable barrier for others contemplating participating in further protest efforts. "An injunction issued by a state court, ostensibly to preclude violence, stopped peaceful marchers in their tracks. The phrase 'law and order' became synonymous with white supremacy, and thus the innocent and even righteous-sounding appeal disguised the segregationist intent." (Judith D. Hoover, "Reconstruction of the Rhetorical Situation in 'Letter from Birmingham Jail' in *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, ed. Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John Louis Lucaites [Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993], 51.)
[124] Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 727.
[125] King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 71.

disobeying the court injunction by joining a protest march on the next day was not a step King would take lightly.

A sixth barrier was the lack of bail money available should King be arrested and thrown into jail. This was one of the primary concerns King discussed with his advisors as they met to make plans for a possible protest march on Good Friday. Those opposed to King's goals of civil rights and equal justice under the law knew that most of the SCLC efforts operated on a shoestring budget. In fact, Birmingham politicians conspired with state officials (including Governor Wallace) to raise the maximum bond in misdemeanor cases from $300 to $2,500, applicable only in their home city.[126] Their tactic was to avoid any unnecessary violence if at all possible, mimicking the "velvet fist" policies of Albany's police chief, Laurie Pritchett, while depleting the movement's energy by depleting the financial resources of the SCLC.

Soon after King and his associates had announced they would defy the court injunction by leading a Good Friday protest march, news reached them that their appointed bail bondsman had reached his credit limit. This meant any new volunteers sent to jail would have no assurance of an early release. Fifty people were waiting in the wings to join King in prison, which would comprise the largest single group arrested in Birmingham up to that date. For over two hours, King consulted with two dozen people in his motel suite. He later described how "a sense of doom began to pervade the room" and his "most dedicated and devoted leaders were overwhelmed by a feeling of

[126] The resolution supposedly argued that Birmingham "has been invaded by foreigners who would by force and violence attempt to overthrow laws which may not be to their liking;" hence the alleged justification for localized bail bond inflation. (Branch, *Parting the Waters,* 726.)

hopelessness."[127] The general consensus was that King should not go to jail, both because they had no funds to secure his release and because he was the best resource for securing new donations to help those already in jail. Surrounded by twenty-four pairs of eyes, King knew that if he backed out of his promise to go to jail, he would be reneging on his word after a recent public announcement about his imminent arrest. He would be rejecting the very path of incarceration he had just spent weeks recruiting and urging hundreds of other Birmingham citizens to follow.[128] Before describing how this crisis was resolved in King's mind, it is necessary to summarize the other, non-political barriers that were a factor in his ultimate decision.

B. Personal & Social Barriers Overcome By King

Those trying to derail King's protest activities in Birmingham used every resource possible to convince him of the fundamental flaws of his efforts. Many people argued that the timing of his movement was wrong, insisting that it did not allow for possible reforms to occur under the leadership of Albert Boutwell, and that it would anger the white business owners whose sales would be hurt by a protest over the Easter holidays.[129] King responded that African Americans have waited more than 340 years for constitutional and God-given rights, and that the argument that they wait for the "right" time is only an apologia for maintaining the status quo.[130] But many of the other concerns

---

[127] King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 72. King himself had set a gloomy tone for the overall discussion with his comment that "he did not want to spend the rest of his life in jail." (Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 728.)
[128] Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: New American Library, 1982), 220; Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 184, 186; King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 72.
[129] Abernathy, *Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 248; King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 66.
[130] King, "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 292.

mentioned to King (or raised within his own mind) were of a more personal nature and thus were harder to rebut.

An initial personal barrier that King had to overcome in deciding to go to jail was the immediate needs of his family. His wife, Coretta, had given birth to their fourth child, Bernice Albertine, just one week prior to the start of the Birmingham campaign.[131] King had left for Birmingham the day after his daughter was born, returning back to Atlanta briefly to take his wife home from the hospital, but leaving that afternoon for further planning sessions. His absenteeism from his family was an ongoing issue during King's public life and ministry.

A second personal barrier was the steady stream of opposition King faced from various members of the African-American community in Birmingham. Some were professionals who believed that Boutwell's administration should be given an opportunity to work for reform. Others showed their opposition by refusing to answer the call at the mass meeting for more protest marchers, out of legitimate fears of arrest and loss of employment.[132] Coretta Scott King comments that under the system of segregation, the "black masses had been brainwashed into accepting the idea that it was impossible to fight the system."[133] Both Coretta and Martin Luther King mention that another reason for peer opposition was the lingering resentment about "outsiders" running the Birmingham campaign and not keeping them properly informed about strategies they were planning to adopt.[134] Taken together, King faced the challenge of trying to lead a

---

[131] Coretta Scott King, *My Life With Martin*, 204.
[132] Adam Fairclough, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 76.
[133] Coretta Scott King, *My Life With Martin*, 204. One scholar has cited an interoffice memorandum by Paul Rilling of the interracial Southern Regional Council saying, "One of the most depressing factors is the apathy and divisiveness of the Negro community. The Ware group, the Shuttlesworth group, the Gaston Circle, are working at cross-purposes and constantly at loggerheads." (Clark, "American Dilemma," 39.)
[134] King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 66-67; Coretta Scott King, *My Life With Martin*, 205.

divided community in Birmingham, thereby making a successful outcome to his efforts (including being sent to jail) far from certain.

Another personal barrier was the fact that almost his entire close circle of personal advisors and friends advised King not to march or join protest efforts that would lead to his arrest in Birmingham. Abernathy has described how their advisory committee asked King not to defy the court injunction or "violate the sanctity of the Easter season by acts of civil disobedience that might provoke violence."[135] A NAACP lawyer, Norman Amaker, warned King early on Good Friday morning that even if the injunction was unconstitutional, marching in violation of it would probably still lead to arrests and time in jail. Also raising objections to King in Room 30 of the Gaston motel was his own father, who strongly questioned the wisdom of violating the court order.[136]

Surrounded by a general mood of hopelessness, the final personal barrier meriting mention is King's own sense of defeat and fear as he considered his immediate options. King had already spent time in jail before and was well aware of the personal risk he faced once he was locked up away from supportive crowds and media attention. In fact, the danger King anticipated facing within the Birmingham jail is verified by the concentrated effort made to contact him (reaching even to President Kennedy) that began as soon as he was eventually arrested on 12 April. He was afraid of what might happen in jail and afraid of not getting released anytime soon from jail.[137] All of the aforementioned reasons, both political and personal, converged on King during the two-hour Gaston

---

[135] Abernathy, *Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 248.
[136] Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 728-29. As an added note of interest, when King did decide to march, he and his advisors left Daddy King alone in the room; but not before Daddy King was heard to mutter, "Well, you didn't get this nonviolence from me. You must have got it from your Mama." (Ibid., 730.)
[137] Fairclough, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 77; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 728.

motel session early on Good Friday morning. Fortunately, we have King's own description of the impact of these barriers as well as his thinking as he surmounted them with the prophetic decision to be arrested that day.

> I sat in the midst of the deepest quiet I have ever felt, with two dozen others in the room. There comes a time in the atmosphere of leadership when a man surrounded by loyal friends and allies realizes he has come face to face with himself. I was alone in that crowded room.
>
> I walked to another room in the back of the suite, and stood in the center of the floor. I think I was standing also at the center of all that my life had brought me to be. I thought of the twenty-four people, waiting in the next room. I thought of the three hundred, waiting in prison. I thought of the Birmingham Negro community, waiting. Then my mind leaped beyond the Gaston Motel, past the city jail, past city lines and state lines, and I thought of twenty million black people who dreamed that someday they might be able to cross the Red Sea of injustice and find their way to the promised land of integration and freedom. There was no more room for doubt.
>
> I pulled off my shirt and pants, got into work clothes and went back to the other room to tell them I had decided to go to jail. "I don't know what will happen; I don't know where the money will come from. But I have to make a faith act."[138]

C. The Second Part of King's Prophetic Act

King's "faith act" was the willingness to lead a protest march on Good Friday and be thrown in jail by Bull Connor's police officers. It was that decision that set in motion the series of events that eventually created the powerful "Letter from Birmingham Jail." But only when both these events (the arrest and subsequent letter) are considered together is the prophetic impact of King's acts fully appreciated. Later, comparisons will be drawn between these events and the previously reviewed prophetic acts associated with Jeremiah. For now, it is important simply to summarize the chain of circumstances that led to the writing of the "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

---

[138] King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 72-73.

On 10 January, King gathered in Dorchester, Georgia with ten advisers to plan "Project C" in Birmingham. With key leaders such as Ralph Abernathy, Wyatt Walker, and Fred Shuttlesworth, they created a plan of attack on the segregationist policies in that city.[139] The hope for the Birmingham campaign was that it would involve more people and be more effective than what had been tried in Albany, ideally reaching a crescendo through an escalating series of organized sit-ins, boycotts, mass marches, and arrests leading to overflowing jails. Immediately after that planning session, King delivered a paper on 14 January in Chicago at the National Conference on Religion and Race entitled "A Challenge to the Churches and Synagogues." In that document, he argued that the "religious bodies in America have not been faithful to their prophetic mission on the question of racial justice," and that if "the Church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become little more than an irrelevant social club with a thin veneer of religiosity."[140]

"Project C" was originally scheduled to begin on 6 March, but due to the election controversy it was delayed twice, first to 14 March and then to 3 April. During that period of delays, King spent time, first in New York City and then in Birmingham, convincing skeptics about the necessity of going ahead with the scheduled protest despite all the publicity around a possible Boutwell city administration.[141] In retrospect, it was

---

[139] Williams, *Eyes of the Prize*, 181-82; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 688-92..

[140] Martin Luther King, Jr. "A Challenge to the Churches and Synagogues," in *Race: Challenge to Religion*, ed. Mathew Ahmann (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1963), 156, 157. King's understanding of "prophetic activity" in this essay involves a willingness to participate actively in the struggle for economic and racial justice, to speak out against segregation, and to guide people to higher levels of understanding. These same qualities correspond to the characteristics of authentic prophetism outlined in this dissertation's working definition (*Deliberate, specific, communicative, and interactive acts performed by representatives of a faith community with the intent of transforming human perceptions of reality in light of the divine nature and will of God.*) It is also noteworthy that the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and this essay both use quotes from Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, and St. Augustine.

[141] Recall earlier citation (fn. 112) from King's writings about how God gave him the power to transform the suspicions and fears of the Birmingham leaders into a new spirit of unity and commitment. (King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 68.)

the combination of the material in the Chicago seminar paper and the arguments presented in the subsequent planning meetings that provided much of the rhetoric and rationales that would later coalesce in the "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

Once King left the meeting with his advisors at the Gaston Motel, he headed for a rally at Sixteenth Street Baptist church, from which he and about forty demonstrators began to march around 2:30 p.m. toward Kelly Ingram Park.[142] Police detectives quickly arrested King and Abernathy, which sparked heightened opposition from the crowds so that eventually fifty-two others were taken to jail that day.[143] Once in jail, King was singled out for solitary confinement. This was an unusual situation for him, since in his other times of incarceration had been able to share a cell with Abernathy. This public man and gregarious personality now found himself isolated in a darkened jail cell with only a metal cot without mattress, pillow or blanket.[144]

An interesting contrast can be made between King's experiences that Good Friday and a gathering of another ministerial group that day. This latter group had no formal name, but had sometimes called themselves the "Committee of Reconciliation."[145] It consisted of eight prominent local clergymen: Bishop J. Durick (Roman Catholic), Rabbi M. Grafman (Jewish), Bishop P. Hardin and Bishop N. Harmon (Methodist), Bishop G. Murray and Bishop C. Carpenter (Episcopalian), Rev. E. Ramage (Presbyterian), and Rev. E. Stallings (Baptist). While King fasted that day in preparation for going to jail, these men gathered in a hotel in Birmingham to share lunch and draft a response to the

---

[142] Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 730; Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 186.
[143] Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 731.
[144] Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, 221.
[145] Bass, *Blessed are the Peacemakers*, 10. One of the group commented how fate and frustration brought them together, trying "to express to each other our sense of frustration and disillusionment with the forces that seemed to prevail in our state and in our city." (Ibid., 11.)

anticipated threat of public, civil rights demonstrations. The clergy were not segregationists; in fact, they had become targets of much pro-segregation abuse since all of them had spoken out in January through a press release challenging Governor George Wallace's proclamation of "segregation now . . . segregation tomorrow . . . segregation forever."[146] Yet in their Good Friday appeal, they used some of the same arguments from their prior statement now against King and the Birmingham campaign leadership. Their remarks emphasized that efforts to eliminate racial injustice should be handled through legal action, not through extreme measures or public demonstrations, and then closed with an appeal for all citizens "to observe the principles of law and order and common sense."

This brief statement was drafted in Bishop Harmon's hotel suite and then appeared in the Birmingham papers on Saturday, 13 April 1963, the day before Easter. It is not entirely clear when the incarcerated King received a copy of the paper containing this ministerial press release. King's own text, *Why We Can't Wait*, does not describe the situation leading up to the composition of the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and Abernathy's book, *And The Walls Came Tumbling Down*, confuses the issue by suggesting that the clergy's statement was read by King on Good Friday morning.[147] According to King, he remained incommunicado from the time of his Friday arrest until at least Easter Sunday, when two attorneys, Orzell Billingsley and Arthur Shores, were

---

[146] Eleven clergy in total signed the 17 January 1963 press statement ("An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense"). It spoke out against the segregationists' radical stance, believing such a position of defiance would lead to discord, violence, and disgrace for Alabama. Ibid., 18-20, 233-34.

[147] Abernathy's text is also incorrect in suggesting the Good Friday press statement was signed by eleven clergymen and misspells Rabbi Grafman's first name as Hilton. The latter error can be traced to editing mistakes when King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" was included (with extra material) as Chapter Five of *Why We Can't Wait.* See Abernathy, *Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 247.

able to visit him.[148] More than likely, King first stumbled on the press release among some papers given to him by New York lawyer, Clarence Jones, who visited him on Monday, 15 April. The clergy statement appeared on page two of the *Birmingham News* with the headline "White Clergymen Urge Local Negroes to Withdraw from Demonstrations" and it was near a photo of himself and Abernathy marching prior to being arrested.[149] King himself was not mentioned by name; however the statement explicitly urged all Birmingham citizens to withhold support for any demonstrations "directed and led in part by outsiders."[150]

The frustrating dynamic for King was that he was being challenged by colleagues who should have been counted among his active supporters. These were liberal clergy who had not only taken a stand against Wallace's segregationist views, but had even admitted African-Americans into special sections of their worship services.[151] King felt he could not remain silent. He immediately began writing a response to the clergy statement, opening his second sentence with the phrase "seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work."[152] King scrawled his thoughts in the margins of the same paper that carried the clergy statement and then handed over his comments to Jones when the lawyer visited the next day. Over the next few days, King's "Letter" was largely composed on scraps of paper and then smuggled out of jail, to be reconstructed and typed off-site by volunteers.

---

[148] King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 75.
[149] Bass, *Blessed are the Peacemakers*, 117.
[150] Ibid., 235-36.
[151] Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 738.
[152] It is noteworthy that King had been approached about writing a prison epistle while incarcerated in Albany in 1962; however he had been dissuaded from writing such a letter by Billy Graham's public relations specialist. Ibid., 602.

The edited version of the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" was over 6000 words long, yet it was never sent to the eight clergymen whose 13 April press statement provoked King's lengthy response. It was not immediately published in the Birmingham newspapers; in fact, it was not officially released by the SCLC until later in May 1963.[153] Excerpts of the "Letter" appeared in the *New York Post* on 19 May, the *New York Times* on 26 May, and *Christianity and Crisis* on 27 May. The first full edition of King's letter was published by the American Friends Service Committee in pamphlet form and released to the public on 28 May.[154] SCLC staffers circulated a copy of the "Letter" in Birmingham during May 1963, but the *Birmingham News* did not even mention the letter until 30 July.[155]

Although in time, over a million copies of King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" were in active circulation, the delays involved in bringing it to print have led some to conclude that it had "no influence on the [Birmingham] campaign."[156] It is hard to argue with that opinion, given that King's essay was not widely read until late May, but the bulk of the civil rights' reform work in Birmingham was codified in an accord publicly announced on 10 May. Taylor Branch has even drawn the following conclusion: "In hindsight, it appeared that King had rescued the beleaguered Birmingham movement with his pen, but the reverse was true: unexpected miracles of the Birmingham movement later transformed King's letter from a silent cry of desperate hope to a famous pronouncement

---

[153] This timetable conflicts with an alternative suggestion by Glenn Eschew that it was released to the press on 18 April 1963; see Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 245. However, the detail-oriented scholarship of Taylor Branch and Jonathan Bass argue for a later release date of the letter. (Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 744; Bass, *Blessed are the Peacemakers*, 134.)
[154] Bass, *Blessed are the Peacemakers*, 141.
[155] Ibid., 143.
[156] Fairclough, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 79.

of moral triumph."[157] In offering a response to Branch's remarks, a similar process to that employed in discerning the prophetic quality of Rosa Parks' act in Montgomery will now be followed in order to lift up evidence in support of a similar prophetic quality to King's acts in Birmingham.

D. Evaluating the Prophetic Quality of Martin Luther King's Acts

An initial step in a provisional evaluation of King's prophetic acts (as associated with the Birmingham campaign) is to consider how his arrest and subsequent writing of the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" fit within the fourfold rhetorical paradigm put forth by Kelvin Friebel. First, did King's actions capture an audience's attention? The public act of being arrested on Good Friday, even if it meant violating a court injunction, ensured that King's acts were witnessed by local, regional, and national audiences. Second, were King's actions readily comprehensible? The honest answer to that question would have to be "No," since King's actions meant different things to different people. To some African Americans in Birmingham, King's willingness to go to jail in order to desegregate their local lunch counters was a clear and courageous act of appropriate civil disobedience. To other African Americans and much of the remaining city population, King's acts were dangerous tactics being used by an "outsider" in order to provoke violence and social disorder, despite all his public rhetoric about peaceful, nonviolent resistance. Similarly, King's willingness to go to jail was perceived either as a sacrificial act for the goal of civil rights or a self-promoting act of media-focused, social manipulation for the goal of civil disorder. It was largely due to these disparate views about the motives behind

---

[157] Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 744.

King's action that led him to write the "Letter from Birmingham Jail," so that his deeds might be more readily comprehensible.

Friebel's third and fourth criteria ask whether the prophetic act (or acts) can be easily remembered as well as provide an incentive for a change in behavior or attitudes. Taken by itself, King's decision to be arrested on 12 April was arguably neither unique nor a strong motivator for change. It was the twelfth time he had been arrested, and the eight days he spent in jail actually caused a loss of momentum for the Birmingham campaign.[158] However, the writing of his "Letter" accomplished both the aforementioned goals. Here was a document written from prison that called to mind the numerous New Testament epistles of Paul that were also composed while enduring unjust imprisonment.[159] Here was a letter ostensibly directed at eight white clergymen, but intended for a much wider audience, including the Kennedy administration, white church "moderates" and national supporters of the American civil rights movement.[160] Over and over again, King scholars name the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" as the most "widely-read, widely-reprinted and oft-quoted document of the civil rights movement."[161] Thus, it can reasonably be judged affirmatively in terms of Friebel's final two criteria.

---

[158] "The demonstrations began to lose supporters as King's incarceration dragged on." (Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 188).

[159] King explicitly references the apostle Paul twice in the letter, once in reference to how an "outsider" like Paul left his village of Tarsus to spread the gospel and once in terms of how King considered himself to be an "extremist" like Paul in the service of the Christian gospel. He even concludes his letter with a passing reference to how he is writing his words as a way to alleviate the dull monotony of being alone in a narrow jail cell, calling to mind the times in Paul's epistles when he mentions being in jail (e.g., Eph 3:1; Phil 1:12-14; 1 Thess 4: 7-10). See also Malinda Snow, "Martin Luther King's 'Letter from Birmingham Jail' as Pauline Epistle," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 71 (1985): 318-34.

[160] Hoover, "Reconstruction of the Rhetorical Situation in 'Letter from Birmingham Jail'," 52, 58-60. Hoover offers an effective analysis of King's letter as *apologia*, using the strategies of denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Ibid., 50-65.

[161] Fairclough, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 79; Bass, *Blessed are the Peacemakers*, 1; Colaiaco, *Apostle of Nonviolence*, 94-95.

A next step in evaluating the prophetic quality of King's acts in Birmingham is to consider whether a dimension of *kairos* was present in his decisions to go to jail and compose the "Letter from Birmingham Jail." The word *kairos* was not in King's active vocabulary; however, the sentiment was present throughout his career's work for civil rights. In a statement made on 1 December 1959, King announced that the "time has come for a broad, bold advance of the Southern campaign for equality" and that he was convinced that "the psychological moment has come when a concentrated drive against injustice can bring great tangible gains."[162] Two years later, in a meeting with President Kennedy, King would argue that the clock of history was "nearing the midnight hour."[163] Others, too, have suggested about the writing of the letter from the Birmingham jail that "time and circumstance conspired to make it necessary."[164]

The quality of *kairos* is present more subtly and implicitly in King's acts in Birmingham than was the case in reference to Rosa Parks' act of defiance in Montgomery. To begin with, King was definitely affected by the experience of being imprisoned in solitary confinement on Good Friday. He described the experience as "brutal," although he also stressed that he "had never been truly in solitary confinement [for] God's companionship does not stop at the door of a jail cell."[165] This timing of events had tremendous symbolic power both for King and for the civil rights'

---

[162] Bennett, *What Manner of Man*, 112.
[163] Ibid., 121.
[164] Clark, "American Dilemma in 'Birmingham Jail," 35. Theologian James Cone has also suggested that "the time was right for his 'Letter,' just as the moment was right for his 'I Have A Dream' speech a few months later." (James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare?*, [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991], 139.)
[165] King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 74-75.

movement.[166] Also, it was in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" that King used some of his most forceful language to date challenging the white moderates and other people of faith who insisted that African Americans be patient, even though they, as a group, had long been aware that "Wait" has almost always meant "Never."[167] In his letter, King spoke both personally and with passion. Soon after he was released on bail on 20 April 1963, King agreed to allow children and students to participate in the Birmingham protest marches. This was a dangerous, yet pivotal, decision on the part of King and his workers. It placed minors at risk and was denounced from many corners; yet it was also a key factor in getting the world literally to see the brutality experienced in segregationist cities. Once Bull Connor's fire hoses and police dogs were set upon peaceful marchers including women and children, the timetable for change in Birmingham was, from all appearances, greatly accelerated. It is possible to attribute some of the courage and visionary conviction of the later Birmingham campaign to King's decisions to be arrested and then compose a personal manifesto about why the time was right for forceful, faithful action.

In defense of that preceding conclusion, it is interesting to note that in an interview King gave to *Playboy* magazine in January 1965, he was asked directly whether the subsequent events in Birmingham and America justified the sentiments King expressed in his letter. Here was King's reply:

> I would say yes. Two or three important and constructive things have happened which can be at least partially attributed to that letter. By now, nearly a million copies of the letter have been widely circulated in churches of most of the major denominations. It helped to focus greater international attention upon what was

---

[166] Fred Shuttlesworth would later comment that King's arrest and jail time "came at a time when the whole Jesus on the Cross significance was before the whole world for Easter," which enabled King's act to transform "the jails into church houses." (Bass, *Blessed are the Peacemakers*, 108.)
[167] King, "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," *Testament of Hope*, 292.

> happening in Birmingham. And I am sure that without Birmingham, the march on Washington wouldn't have been called – which in my mind was one of the most creative steps the Negro struggle has taken. . . . It was also the image of Birmingham which, to a great extent, helped to bring the Civil Rights Bill into being in 1963. Previously, President Kennedy had decided not to propose it that year, feeling that it would so arouse the South that it would meet a bottleneck. But Birmingham, and subsequent developments, caused him to reorder his legislative priorities.[168]

Thus, while it may be difficult to pinpoint a precise kairotic moment in the events associated with King's leadership in Birmingham, a strong case can be made for assigning that quality to his willingness to be arrested and the subsequent writing of his "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

A third step in assessing King's acts is to ask whether he was guided by an ethical position of moral relativism or moral realism, as differentiated in the work of William Schweiker. Since the events in Birmingham were preceded by several years of civil rights activism, it is necessary to go back in King's career to explore the roots of his ethical system. In the early 1950s, King completed a doctoral degree at Boston University. His dissertation subject was "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wiemann." King later commented that this topic was a way to explore his basic philosophical interest in "personalism," which for him refers to the idea that "the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality is found in personality."[169] King's own philosophy of personal idealism served as a source for his belief in a personal God, as well as a metaphysical basis for respecting the dignity and worth of all human

---

[168] King, "*Playboy* Interview," *Testament of Hope*, 351.
[169] Lerone Bennett, Jr., *What Manner of Man: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1976), 48.

personality. King's combination of a biblically-grounded faith and a philosophical belief in a personal God aligns closely with the ethical perspective of moral realism.[170]

A final step in evaluating the prophetic quality of King's acts in Birmingham is to draw comparisons between his activity and the biblical examples of prophetism already cited. Of the prophetic acts of Jeremiah surveyed earlier, the ones most helpful when considering the incidents associated with King are the prophetic acts of the spoiled waistcloth (Jeremiah 13) and the scroll written against the Babylonians (Jeremiah 51). Both of these events involve two acts that, taken together, comprise a single prophetic message. For example, the loincloth was first buried and then displayed after it was spoiled, in order to serve as a warning for the houses of Israel and Judah. Likewise, Jeremiah first wrote a prophecy against Babylon on a scroll and then entrusted it to Seraiah to read it aloud before throwing it in the Euphrates river, as an act symbolizing how Babylon itself was doomed to sink into oblivion.[171] By comparison, King's commitment to achieve integration in Birmingham led first to his arrest and then to his composition of the "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Although King did not initially plan to write a letter while incarcerated, when the situation presented itself to him, it offered an excellent opportunity for giving a powerful exposition about why the time for integration and justice had finally arrived. Thus, the events in Birmingham became *a posteriori* a two part prophetic act.

---

[170] "To say God is personal is not to make him an object among other objects or attribute to him the finiteness and limitations of human personality; it is to take what is finest and noblest in our consciousness and affirm its perfect existence in him." (King, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," *Testament of Hope*, 40.)

[171] At first glance, the prophetic act involving stones set in mortar in Tahpanhes involves two distinct acts. However, the second part of the prophetic drama (establishing the throne of Nebuchadnezzar upon the stones) is something whose fulfillment would potentially only occur at a much later date.

Another similarity exists between the Birmingham events and the prophetic act described in Jer 13:1-11. The prophet Jeremiah takes a common linen loincloth and, after allowing it to become rotten, displays how it no longer serves the purpose for which it was intended. In the same way, King held up for public scrutiny the civil laws of segregated Birmingham and exposed them as being corrupt and contrary to purposes of justice for which laws should be enacted. By walking peaceably down the street (yet thereby prompting his arrest for civil disobedience), King paraded to the residents of Birmingham how their laws were like the indictment found in Jer 13:10 – "This evil people, who refuse to obey my words, who stubbornly follow their own will and have gone after other gods to serve them and worship them, shall be like this loincloth, which is good for nothing." Unlike the mimetic actors who only reflect the general opinion of their audiences, King was embodying the role of a prophet, both by challenging the prevailing group sentiments and being a motivating influence for constructive change.[172]

Turning to the prophetic act described in Jer 51:59-64, the obvious similarity is that both involve written words that were intended for a larger audience. Although the content of Jeremiah's scroll against Babylon is not explicitly known, the assumption is that it contained some of the material found in Jer 50:1-51:58. And though the scroll was intended to be tied to a stone and thrown into the Euphrates, it was more than likely first read out loud to the Judean community living in exile in Babylon. In making a comparison with King's situation in Birmingham, it does not take much effort to draw linkages between the exile community existing as a subjugated people in Babylon and the experience of modern African Americans living under the oppressive social order of segregated Birmingham. Both groups were taking guidance and seeking inspiration from

[172] See earlier discussion of these categories in Chapter Two.

an absent leader, whether the distant prophet Jeremiah or the imprisoned King. Lastly, in both cases, the work of disseminating the information was entrusted to someone other than the prophetic author. In the former situation, Baruch's brother Seraiah was given the task of reading the prophecy against Babylon. In the latter situation, King's co-workers within the SCLC organization as well as the faith community and American news media were responsible for sharing the message of the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" to as many people as possible. Accounts of the creation of both documents have survived through the intervening years, even as all records of many other contemporary works have long since vanished. These acts of speaking out by faith, whether done on behalf of a subjugated people whose words are tossed into the Euphrates river or on behalf of an oppressed race whose views and civil liberties are routinely disregarded, have over time proven to be powerful and truly prophetic.

Since his assassination in 1968, King has been remembered in many ways, including as a modern-day prophet.[173] When his deeds in the Birmingham campaign are considered in light of the working definition of prophetic activity already proposed, they can be acknowledged as deliberate and specific acts, performed by a person actively grounded in a faith community. King's arrest and subsequent essay-writing were communicative and interactive acts, preceded by a sense of divine presence and call, and followed by further interpretative acts intended to modify and transform patterns of human social reality. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that his acts of witness done in

---

[173] One author refers to King as a prophet in the sense that he was one who spoke on behalf of God and interpreted God's present will to humankind. (Eugene H. Maly, *Prophets of Salvation* [New York: Herder and Herder, 1967], 15-20.) Another author has stressed that King's prophetic activity did not attack people, but rather spoke out against the powers that unjustly enslaved people. This characteristic made him "not a sage who proclaimed a new truth, but a prophet who renewed an old one." (Robert G. Hoyt, *Martin Luther*

Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 fit the general description of prophetic acts already outlined.

King, Jr. [Waukesha, WI: County Beautiful Foundation, 1970], 14.) Cited in Hanigan, *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Foundations of Nonviolence*, 50.

Chapter 6:
Conclusion

I. Concluding Summary

For centuries, the west façade of Westminster Abbey in London had empty exterior niches waiting for statues to fill them. A recent restoration effort finally completed that task. On either side of the Great West Door were placed four allegorical figures representing the virtues of mercy, truth, justice, and peace. Above those figures was a row of ten niches, in which it was decided to place statues commemorating various twentieth-century Christian martyrs. Prominently adorning the left center niche is a statue of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.[1] This honor is a significant and impressive one for a figure whose efforts were considered suspect and dangerously extremist during his lifetime.

In the biographical material compiled to describe each of these martyrs, King is identified as "one of the great prophetic leaders of the later twentieth century."[2] Members of a Westminster Abbey planning commission must have reached agreement on considering King to be a modern martyr and prophet deserving of such recognition. They

---

[1] Next to King are statues of Oscar Romero and Dietrich Bonhoeffer; the remaining seven martyrs are figures from Poland, Russia, South Africa, Uganda, China, Pakistan, and New Guinea. The statues were unveiled by the Archbishop of Canterbury on 9 July 1998.

[2] Full accounts of the martyrs are found in *The Terrible Alternative*, ed. Andrew Chandler (London: Cassell, 1998).

were affirming something that many other scholars, individuals and groups had already decided as they reflected on the legacy of Dr. King. But what criteria are available when people seek to designate someone a modern-day prophet? What theological and ethical resources provide guidance when reviewing whether contemporary acts are "prophetic" or not?

In this dissertation, an attempt has been made to respond to these questions. Possible criteria and resources have been suggested, and examples were considered in order to move the analysis from abstract theory to concrete praxis. While much more could be written about this topic, what remains now are two tasks: to summarize the material already discussed and to put forth questions worthy of further consideration so that this conversation may continue. That latter goal is of particular value, as the ten statues over the Great West Door of Westminster Abbey bear silent witness.

A. Biblical Definitions

For the purposes of this dissertation, the category of prophetism under consideration has been largely restricted to that found within the broad biblical tradition of the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament writings. On the basis of the survey of biblical material found in the first chapter, we can now suggest three correctives to the backdrop of common understandings of prophetism. Three creative tensions associated with prophetism will also be proposed. The first corrective is that prophets are not so much involved in foretelling the future as they are involved in "forth-telling," declaring the word and/or will of God in relation to the immediate concerns of a community. While

words of judgment may be spoken that describe future trials and tribulations, the prophets' primary focus is on challenging some present crisis of injustice, idolatry or disobedience.

The second corrective involves seeing the prophetic role as being more active than passive. While is it customary to consider prophets to be messengers for God, the act of conveying a prophetic message is not analogous to that of a court reporter reading off verbatim legal transcripts. Rather, prophetic discourse is a rhetorical act intended to communicate a specific message. This requires that prophets shape aspects of the message so that it can be heard and understood by their audience. The third corrective builds on the previous insight, in that prophetism is a threefold, not a twofold, process. Instead of limiting prophetic activity to a divine source and a prophetic spokesperson, it is more accurate to acknowledge the important role played by the prophet's audience. Seeing prophetism as a threefold process involving God, prophets, and audiences also means that the prophetic message is characterized by a threefold pattern of information transmitted, information received, and feedback delivered at each stage of this process.

As Chapter One demonstrated, biblical descriptions of prophetism can be shown to support these definitional correctives. They also point to three tensions inherent in any discussion of prophetic activity. The first tension relates to the question of prophetic authority, in particular, the tension between self-authorizing, individual prophetic calls and individuals being accepted in the prophetic role by a larger faith community. While it is impossible to quantify prophetic authority, any prophetic act depends on two foci: a prophet's sense of divine call and a community's willingness to ascribe prophetic

legitimacy to a person's words and deeds. Connecting these foci in some sort of workable equilibrium appears to be an important component in any prophetic process.

The second tension involves the realm of history, namely, that which exists between human beings' ability to freely determine their own destiny and the biblical understanding of a God whose activity impinges upon human history. The biblical material speaks of divine-human covenants and relationships of *ḥesed* (loving-kindness); however, prophetic activity must always contend with presenting a message to people and nations freely able both to disregard what is told them and to devise alternative understandings about historical reality.

The third tension arises when the authenticity of prophetic activity is judged based on whether what is proclaimed actually comes to pass. This approach follows the premise of the New Testament verse "You shall know them by their fruits," and places the burden of proof upon the prophet's audience and their judgments made in hindsight. Yet prophets routinely bring messages that are counter-cultural and at variance with the dominant trends in any given society. The tension arises when the "fruits" that are "harvested" from prophetic activity are not the "crops" either desired or valued by a particular community in their immediate context. This makes rendering immediate verdicts about a prophet's authenticity quite difficult.

All of these points are important when considering prophetic acts that might occur in modern and contemporary social contexts. The qualities of "forth-telling," of active engagement in the prophetic process, and recognizing the rhetorical role of the audience in all prophetism are helpful when considering this topic in a post-modern setting. Also,

naming the tensions associated with questions of authority, historical determinism, and authenticity coincides with the similar concerns present in much of contemporary society.

B. Prophetic Paradigms

Out of the array of biblical and extra-biblical material available when considering the topic of prophetism, the primary examples examined in the second chapter were six prophetic acts attributed to the prophet Jeremiah. If these examples are taken to be paradigmatic, then two general characteristics of prophetic acts can be briefly described. First, prophetic acts are rhetorical events that can be analyzed in regard to their ability to grab an audience's attention, to be readily understood by those who witness (or later hear about) the event, to be remembered for the foreseeable future, and to be accepted as something necessitating an adjustment in current moral attitudes or ethical behavior. Second, prophetic acts are not overly apocalyptic in character. They do not reinforce perspectives of extreme denigration for the present world order, nor do they consider the current crisis situations as being beyond hope of redemption. Rather than ignoring "this world" in order to proclaim "the world to come" through acts of supernatural intervention, Jeremiah (and other biblical prophets) proclaim how the Lord of all history sought justice and change for "this world" in order to give it hope and redemption both for the present and future ages.

Three tests for considering the authenticity of prophetic acts were also briefly mentioned in the second chapter. They were the "test of tradition" (Does the act resemble prior acts that have already gained general acceptance within the faith community?), the "test of forbearance" (Does the act still seem valid after a period of reflection and

review?), and the "Deuteronomic test" (Does the prophet encourage in the people a mood of false complacency?).[3] Eventually the following working definition was proposed: *Authentic prophetic acts are deliberate, specific, communicative, and interactive acts performed by representatives of a faith community with the intent of transforming human perceptions of reality and actions in light of the divine nature and will of God.* A more concise version of this definition was cited from the work of Morna Hooker, who wrote that prophetic actions are "dramatic presentations of the truth, an unveiling of what already exists in the divine intention . . . [that] points beyond itself to the purposes of God."[4] Establishing a working definition helped the discussion to move ahead to consider now whether contemporary society is truly open to theological perspectives that speak of "divine intentions" and "truth being unveiled" within the events of human history.

C. Theological Understandings

The third chapter focused on the theology of Paul Tillich and his perspective on the nature and purpose of prophetism. Given that Tillich is a theologian commonly associated with the language of "ultimate concern" and "ground of being," it is not surprising that his writings are informed by a theological understanding that recognizes a quality of depth in all of life. Acknowledging this dimension of depth is an important part of his discussions of prophetic activity. This can be seen in reviewing and elaborating upon three theological principles that arise from Tillich's work. First, there is the well-known "Protestant Principle," which can be summarized as a faith-based

---

[3] The first two are tests using my own choice of vocabulary, while the third comes from Deut 18:22.
[4] Morna Hooker, *The Signs of a Prophet: The Prophetic Actions of Jesus* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1997), 4.

protest against every power that claims divine character for itself. This includes all tendencies toward paganism, polytheism, or idolatry that occur within the context of a specific faith community as well as beyond its sphere of influence. It relates to the category of depth by its unequivocal focus on the absolute majesty of God alone that then raises prophetic protests against any human claim to similar absolute status.

The second principle might be called the "Kairos Principle." The absoluteness of God is affirmed to extend over the realm of historical time, so that at particular moments one might speak of the eternal breaking into the temporal. This theological understanding also relates to the category of depth because Tillich would insist that prophetic, kairotic events unveil a dimension of depth within the circumstances in which people ordinarily exist.

The third principle can be characterized as the "Ubiquity Principle."[5] This was indirectly discussed earlier in relation to Tillich's insistence that God's activity (as revealed or proclaimed in prophetic activity) cannot be restricted to holy realms or manifest church communities. Strictly divided categories of sacred and secular (or latent and manifest faith communities) are inappropriate when considering the omnipresent nature of God (i.e., God's creative participation in the spatial existence of all creatures).[6]

Taken together, these three principles derived from the writings of Tillich add important aspects to our consideration of possible prophetic acts in modern and contemporary society. They emphasize the quality of spiritual depth active in human existence, and call to mind how prophets seek to honor that depth by challenging all

---

[5] This is not Tillich's term. Tillich does, however, speak about the omnipresence of God, which serves as a partial basis for suggesting a principle of ubiquity. See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 1:274-278.
[6] Ibid., 1:277.

idolatrous claims to false authority or absolute truth. The latter two principles go further in insisting that temporal and spatial limitations of the human realm are not limitations for the kairotic, omnipresent activity of God. Yet what remained unresolved in the survey of Tillich's thought was the question of how prophetic activity can be judged to be morally and ethically authentic. This important concern was reflected upon in the fourth chapter.

D. Ethical Presuppositions

The work of theological ethicist William Schweiker was surveyed to help glean possible ethical presuppositions upon which judgments about the authenticity of contemporary prophetic acts might be based. Schweiker's assertions about moral realism (and the related area of hermeneutical realism) offer important insights for the topic at hand. For example, Schweiker calls for an ethical orientation in life that relates two fundamental perspectives. First, as human beings, we are to acknowledge that we live, move, and have our being in God alone. This presupposes that God is the sole necessary condition for all that exists. Second, we are to see ourselves as beings called to respect and enhance the integrity of life that is lived before God. The phrase "before God" is crucial because it is this divine grounding of moral-ethical values that prompts us to recognize that human power is neither axiologically basic nor the sole source of what is good in life.

It is my contention that, if we accept Schweiker's proposed ethical orientation in life, then the category of contemporary prophetism is both possible and important for lives of moral authenticity. This is due to three implications of Schweiker's position.

First, the position of moral realism that grounds our being in God alone presumes that time is "full" (to use Schweiker's distinctive vocabulary). Temporality is not an empty quality of life, waiting to be filled and given meaning by human activity. Rather it is rich with meaning and teleological import arising from its divine grounding. Human beings, then, find themselves in the role of creative stewards acting in a temporal realm given shape and meaning by God. Second, Schweiker, borrowing a phrase from Paul Ricoeur, suggests that "we invent in order to discover." This can be understood to mean that human beings take an active role in grappling with and interpreting the ethical dimension of life, which is a process that leads to a discovery (at least partially) of the deeper ethical foundations present in being itself. Tillich spoke earlier of prophetic activity that reveals a dimension of depth within the dimension in which we live. Schweiker would argue that this dimension that is discovered through ethical (in which I would include 'prophetic') activity is a dimension that arises from a foundation of moral realism. Instead of believing that moral values are human constructs and cultural inventions, Schweiker's theological ethics point to a moral realist foundation that is not reducible to human creativity. It is this foundation that undergirds prophetism and that allows for the possibility of transformative prophetic acts, which is the third and final point.

Third, the mimetic process of ethical figuration (what Schweiker meant by his terminology of "inventing" in order to represent and make comprehensible the ethical foundations for life) is a "horizon-fusing" process, bringing together the interpreter and that which is interpreted in a new relation of understanding and action. The catalyst for this process is, according to Schweiker, a symbolic act or event. In his words, such acts

show us what we could not otherwise see.[7] I contend that the acts Schweiker describes can be called prophetic in a way that is analogous to the definitions already elucidated.

E. Sociological Authentication

Equipped with the insights from biblical sources, Tillich, and Schweiker, the next challenge was to identify concrete acts from recent history that embody the theological ethics of authentic prophetism. It is, however, important to note that no prophetic activity occurs in a vacuum. Whether or not the means of reporting and describing this activity provide information about the immediate context in which the acts took place, prophetic activity always emerges from within some cultural and sociological setting. It is true that the biblical material about prophetism may not provide as much contextual information as is available when considering prophetic acts in modern society; yet, whether the focus is on canonical or contemporary examples of prophetism, we have noticed three significant points concerning the sociological context for prophetic activity.

First, prophets arise from and speak to a particular community. Seen from a rhetorical perspective, this means that it is wise for any consideration of prophetic messages and acts also to attend to the dynamic of "feedback." This may be broadly defined to include the perceptions of the community concerning the supposed 'prophetic' role of the figure, the reaction of the community to the prophetic act, and the means by which the community chooses to honor (or dishonor) the prophetic activity through remembering and responding to what the prophet did. It can be argued that prophets are not "called" by communities; they are "called" by God. However, communities

---

[7] William Schweiker, "Interpretation, Teaching, and American Theological Ethics," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1990): 286.

authenticate the prophetic call. Based on the examples of Jeremiah and other prophets as described in the Hebrew scriptures, this authentication frequently appears to have occurred during the time of their prophetic activity. In modern or contemporary times, such authentication is more commonly given after the fact by virtue of communal hindsight and the alterations of historical memory.

Second, prophetic acts are never simple affirmations of the status quo. Prophets of any historical period seek to point out the distinction between the divine 'intent' and human 'content.' They protest against all forms of idolatry and insist on true justice in all relationships. They call for a remembrance of past covenantal devotion, which from their perspective necessitates present changes for promised future benefits.[8]

Third, the goal of these correctives offered by prophets is moral transformation of individuals and communities alike. Through helping people to recognize another dimension active in the circumstances in which they live, or to see by faith what could not be otherwise seen, prophets instigate changes in moral perceptions, ethical standards, and religious understandings.

To accomplish these tasks, especially in the context of modern society, it is important to recognize that prophetic figures are people who are both influenced in their behavior and beset by obstacles that would silence their prophetic voices or restrain their prophetic activity. Four modern prophetic figures whose stories illustrate this were considered in the sixth chapter. First, Mahatma Gandhi's implementation of the 1930 Salt March was reviewed. The influences leading to his undertaking this prophetic march

---

[8] For a fuller exposition on this point, there are the eight specific marks of Hebraic prophecy outlined by Daniel Maguire; see Daniel Maguire, *The Moral Core of Judaism and Christianity: Reclaiming the Revolution* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 174-92.

were, among others, his prior experience in South Africa, the insights gleaned from the Bardoli *satyagraha*, and his philosophical conviction about the fundamental injustice represented in the Salt Tax. Some of the obstacles he surmounted included the questioning by some of his own followers about his choice of a salt *satyagraha* and the difficulty of requiring adherence to ashram-style discipline among the crowds of fellow marchers. Many people considered it to be impossible to bring about radical political change simply by challenging a tax that only impeded local salt manufacture for a few districts on the coastal region of India. But at the culmination of the Salt March, Gandhi spoke both prophetically and truthfully when he said, "With this, I am shaking the foundations of the British Empire."[9]

Second, we considered how the night that Henry David Thoreau spent in the Concord jail for failing to pay his poll tax became the catalyst for writing his seminal essay, "On Civil Disobedience." Along with this experience, influences on his choice of actions include the prior arrests (for similar reasons) of Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane, as well as Thoreau's own "Walden-enhanced" conviction to live deliberately outside the denigrating influence of most social institutions. Some of the obstacles he faced included the stigma attached to serving a jail sentence for a questionable act of civil disobedience and the isolation that inevitably follows taking controversial stands on social-political issues. But in his prophetic act and subsequent essay, Thoreau was not deterred by the perceived "smallness" of his behavior, for, as he put it, "it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done for ever."[10]

---

[9] Dennis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 115.
[10] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden or, Life in the Woods, and On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* (New York: Signet Classics, 1960), 230.

The third and fourth examples were examined in greater detail, and both fit more closely with the biblical, prophetic precedents surveyed earlier. As a companion to Gandhi's 1930 Salt March, Rosa Parks' 1955 refusal to vacate her bus seat in Montgomery, Alabama was considered. A range of possible influences deriving from her personal, family, and communal life were mentioned. Some of the obstacles she overcame included the real risk of violence she faced, the hesitancy of her immediate family when Parks put herself at the center of the segregation controversy, and the long history of oppression that conspired to convince this African American seamstress that her sense of personal dignity and belief in Christian justice were sorely misplaced. Yet on the day Rosa Parks refused to heed James Blake's racist order, she became a modern prophet and the "mother of the civil rights movement."[11]

Linked in certain respects to Thoreau's night in jail and essay on civil disobedience was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1963 arrest in Birmingham, Alabama and subsequent "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Almost all the prior examples discussed in this dissertation could be seen as influential in shaping the prophetic activity of Dr. King. He was well versed in the ideas of Gandhi and Thoreau, and was first thrust into the spotlight because of his leadership of the Montgomery Improvement Association following Rosa Parks' arrest. As a minister and scholar, he was thoroughly grounded in the biblical source material, the prophetic examples from the Hebrew scriptures, the theology of Paul Tillich, and the ethical perspective of moral realism that would later be fleshed out in the writings of William Schweiker. Before his arrest in Birmingham, King had already experienced firsthand the hardship of prison time and seen the physical risks

[11] Roxanne Brown, "Mother of the Movement: Nation Honors Rosa Parks with Birthday Observance," *Ebony* 43 (Feb 1988): 70-72.

and violence endured by friends, family, and innocent colleagues. In the previous chapter, a specific list of barriers was described, including obstacles set before King relating to the legal, financial, social, and personal arenas of his life.

Yet a *kairos* moment descended upon King while in solitary confinement in the Birmingham city jail. In his letter, he spoke prophetically to the white moderate clergy who had voiced their disapproval of his nonviolent campaign in a paid newspaper editorial. He spoke prophetically to a nation insistent on racial justice coming incrementally and slowly, even though the historical record called into serious question any confidence about change occurring without determined legal and activist pressure. And he spoke with a voice of faithful, prophetic hope, ending his letter by praying that "the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all of their scintillating beauty."[12]

These actions of King and Parks were both based upon a firm and sincere foundation of personal faith. When asked about her choice of actions that day in Montgomery, it has been noted how Rosa Parks was quick to respond, "God has always given me the strength to say what is right. . . . I knew that [God] was with me, and only [God] could get me through the next step."[13] And when King was confronted on Good Friday morning by hesitant advisors and a sense of despair about the success of the Birmingham campaign, he thought about the needs of twenty million black Americans

---

[12] Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 302.
[13] Rosa Parks with Gregory J. Reed, *Dear Mrs. Parks: A Dialogue With Today's Youth* (New York: Lee & Low Books, 1996), 42.

who, in his mind, "dreamed that someday they might be able to cross the Red Sea of injustice and find their way to the promised land of integration and freedom." In deciding to go to jail, King was unable to provide practical or rational reasons for his actions, except to say, "I have to make a faith act."[14] Given the centrality of faith perspectives for these two figures, it can be argued that the acts of both King and Parks can be considered analogous to the biblical, prophetic precedents surveyed earlier.

F. Proposing Criteria

The preceding chapters have delineated the parameters associated with prophetism and authentic prophetic acts. It has been proposed that they involve an active, rhetorical process, arising from the context of a faith community, and engaging the world for goals of religious proclamation, ethical correction, and moral transformation. It is now possible to propose three criteria for considering whether or not a modern act can be called 'prophetic' in the sense we have developed here. First, there should be a correlation between the modern act and scriptural paradigms. This is because the vocabulary of prophetism arises from the scriptural material, coupled with the continued adherence to and appropriation of this vocabulary by various faith communities. For the word 'prophetic' to have any theological and ethical meaning today, it needs to maintain its semantic grounding in the scriptural material. Consequently, those who ascribe the word 'prophetic' in its fullest and most accurate sense (whether as prophetic actors, audiences to prophetic acts, or both) would most likely be quite familiar with, if not adherents of, the faith traditions built around scriptural material describing prophetic acts.

---

[14] Martin Luther King, Jr. *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet Books, 1964), 73.

Second, I propose that a quality of *kairos* ought to be detectable in contemporary prophetic acts. It is true that this is a subjective determination and most commonly only perceived in hindsight. From a theological perspective, the quality of *kairos* is more than simply concluding that an act was prophetic if it was performed in a timely fashion and eventually achieved some specified goals. *Kairos* relates to the "fullness" of time and to a heightened awareness of a dimension to life "deeper" than the dimension normally experienced. It includes acts that can be considered to manifest a quality of transcendence, in which aspects of the eternal, in some form or manner, are encountered through that which is temporal and particular.

Third, a prophetic act is one that is instrumental in transforming moral understanding and ethical behavior. This can be a difficult quality to ascribe, since it seems to presume an ability to stand "outside" a specific context and objectively evaluate the effects of a designated act. However, it is not always difficult to determine whether a particular act led to changes in behavior, whether in individual or communal contexts. Neither is it impossible to evaluate whether actions support an ethical objective related to respecting and enhancing the integrity of life that is lived before God. Insofar as the act offers corrective or transformational ethical insights that apply to circumstances at hand, but can also be applied beyond a particular historical and social context (which is an important consideration if a philosophy of moral realism is undergirding this system of theological ethics), it would then seem possible to designate such acts as being 'prophetic.'

In conclusion, I am proposing the tripartite criteria of 1) correlation between biblical and modern prophetic acts, 2) detectable quality of *kairos* in the act, and 3)

instrumentality for transforming moral understanding and ethical behavior, which have emerged from the various sources and approaches examined here. I suggest that, while not exhaustive, these three criteria can helpfully direct Christians and others who seek to evaluate potential prophetic acts today.

II. Continuing the Conversation

As we close, it is appropriate to acknowledge some of the questions prompted by this discussion about contemporary prophetic acts. These questions relate to the material previously discussed and conclusions reached in the earlier chapters. Although they cannot be fully answered at this point, I will pose two questions and offer a few closing reflections.

Question #1: How does one discern the authenticity and veracity of a prophetic act?

Writing a doctoral dissertation is a multi-year process. Since the present project has been underway, a host of significant events have occurred in the United States and around the world. The end of the 1990s and the turn of the century, for example, seemed to be dominated by news stories about violence in public schools. Beginning with a tragic incident in Dunblane, Scotland, in which sixteen children and one teacher were gunned down on 13 March 1996, a long string of school violence unfolded: Pearl, Mississippi (1 October 1997); West Paducah, Kentucky (1 December 1997); Jonesboro, Arkansas (24 March 1998); Springfield, Oregon (21 May 1998); and Littleton, Colorado (20 April 1999), to name a few. As people tried to make sense of these tragic events, individual

acts of bravery were widely publicized and celebrated as causes for hope in times of sorrow.

When 14-year-old Michael Carneal opened fire on a prayer group at Heath High School in West Paducah, Kentucky, stories quickly spread how a preacher's son, Ben Strong, managed to convince Carneal to drop the weapon. His act was considered heroic and courageous.[15] In the later tragedy at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in which fifteen people died and twenty-three more were wounded, one of the victims was a student named Cassie Bernall. She was a freshman who, according to early accounts of the school shooting, was in the school library when one of the teenage killers held a gun to her head and asked her if she believed in God. Cassie said, "Yes" and was then fatally shot. The story because the centerpiece of a book entitled "She Said Yes" by Bernall's parents, the heart of a worship-service drama called "Crossroads at Columbine," and the core of various church presentations about a young Christian martyr willing to profess her faith even at the cost of her life.[16]

The problem with these two compelling stories of Christian witness and courageous acts is that subsequent investigation has shown them not to be remembered accurately. Ben Strong was initially credited with heroically confronting Michael Carneal and telling him to surrender the gun. This version of the incident appeared in *Time*, on ABC's "Good Morning America," and CNN's "Larry King Live," as well as being the inspiration for a song titled "BStrong." Only later did Strong acknowledge that the heroic picture of his actions was inaccurate and "that the story of what happened the day of the

---

[15] William Glaberson, "When Grief Wanted a Hero, Truth Didn't Get in the Way," *New York Times*, Tuesday, 25 July 2000, A1.
[16] Hanna Rosin, "Columbine Miracle: A Matter of Belief," *The Washington Post*, 14 October 1999, C1; Susan B. Wallace, "Church to dramatize 'day-to-day' life of Bernall," *Denver Post*, 2 November 1999, B7.

shooting might be different from the one that is widely known."[17] And at Columbine High School, it is true that a young girl was wounded by gunman Dylan Klebold in the school library and was asked if she believed in God, but it was not Cassie Bernall; it was Valeen Schnurr. This is known because Valeen survived that day, and other eyewitnesses have later raised serious doubts to the Bernall story as reported in the press and the best-selling book.[18]

The supposed courage shown by Strong and Bernall was characterized soon after the respective events as being inspiring, powerful symbols of Christian faith in time of trial. Their examples were seen as epitomizing Christian witness; indeed, as if they were acting or speaking with the conviction of prophets in a hostile, violent world. Yet their example has since been shown to be misunderstood, if not outright falsely portrayed. What resources are available to assist in evaluating the authenticity and veracity of symbolic and prophetic acts?

Authenticity can be difficult to discern, as was seen in the example of the competing prophetic testimonies of Jeremiah and Hananiah already considered. Jeremiah's prophetic act of wearing a wooden ox-yoke (as described in Jeremiah 27-28) was a testimony to the necessity of tolerating Babylonian rule over the kingdom of Judah. Hananiah directly refuted this position, first in words and then in deed, when he tore the yoke off of Jeremiah's neck. At the time, Hananiah's message was the one popularly favored in the royal courts and his proclamation could conceivably have passed the "test of tradition," in that it resembled in form and content the prophetic paradigms. Yet in

---

[17] Glaberson, "When Grief Wanted a Hero," *New York Times*, 25 July 2000, A1, A20.
[18] Rosin, "Columbine Miracle," *The Washington Post*, 14 October 1999; Sean Kelly, "Bernall Family Defends Accuracy of their Book about Cassie," *Denver Post*, 26 September 1999, A23.

relation to the "Deuteronomic test" (not encouraging a mood of false complacency) and the "test of forbearance," it was the message of Jeremiah that later would be shown to be the authentic prophetic word.

The veracity of accounts of specific events can also be quite difficult to discern with authority. The nature of modern communication techniques, coupled with the rush to report stories in today's era of non-stop news coverage, combine to cause the public to view how many events are reported with a degree of skepticism. The initial false reports about Ben Strong and Cassie Bernall, for example, were not told intending to distort the truth or mislead others; however, their veracity was later questioned, which undermined the claims to authenticity of these specific acts.

I would suggest that the three criteria mentioned earlier in this chapter (correlation to biblical precedents, presence of a quality of *kairos*, and instrumentality in transforming moral-ethical understandings), coupled with a quality of forbearance when considering the veracity of accounts of specific events, can be effective in helping discern authentic prophetic acts in contemporary society.

Question #2: Can prophetic acts only arise from, and be fully received by, communities of faith?

This second question is more difficult to answer, yet it is worthy of consideration and further discussion. A compelling case can be made for responding to this question both in the affirmative and the negative. Yes, authentic prophetic acts only arise from, and are only fully received by, communities of faith, because this entire category of religious proclamation is dependent on a foundation (and faith appropriation) of the

biblical sources for prophetism. No, authentic prophetic acts cannot be limited to communities of faith for their inspiration and their reception, because to do so would potentially restrict the activity of God to the manifest Spiritual Community (using Tillich's terminology) and risk portraying possibilities of ethical transformation as being morally relativistic (using Schweiker's categories).

In attempting to break this impasse, one central point is worth noting. There are important symbolic acts that take place outside of communities of faith, that in certain cases could be considered to be 'prophetic' in nature, even if their participants do not use that vocabulary to describe them. For example, consider the legal category of "symbolic conduct" as it has been defined in First Amendment cases of constitutional law. Under the category of "free speech," some types of non-verbal symbolic conduct have been discussed in the high courts. Examples include cases involving picketing, draft card and flag burnings, and sit-in protests.[19] The legal precedents look to whether such acts are distinctive in nature and have a clear intent to communicate idea or message. In that sense, the courts turn to communication theory to help determine whether non-verbal actions should receive a degree of protection under the First Amendment that is already awarded to pure speech.

What happens, though, when the message contained in this particular "symbolic conduct" is religious in nature? The "sit down" protest of Rosa Parks and the "sit-in" protests organized by King and leaders in the civil rights' movement had a certain legal status as non-religious events of civil disobedience, while also arising from strong

---

[19] See *Cox v. Louisiana I* (picketing); *O'Brien v. United* States (draft card burning); *People v. Street* (flag burning); and Brown *v. Louisiana* (sit-in cases). Haig A. Bosmajian, *The Rhetoric of Nonverbal Communication* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1971); see especially Chapter 11 on "Symbolic Conduct," which reprints an article from the *Columbia Law Review* 68: 6 (1968).

convictions of personal, religious faith. It would seem possible for the same act to be described from both religious and non-religious perspectives. Whether an act is non-religious symbolic conduct or an expression of religious prophetism seems to depend on both the intent of the actor and the content of the message received by the audience.

In attempting to respond to the question posed earlier, perhaps it is best to separate it into two parts. Prophetic acts can arise in a wide range of situations, both explicitly religious and non-religious. Likewise, motivations influencing the performer of a symbolic act can be traced to both religious and non-religious sources. Yet a community of faith seems to be necessary to fully receive prophetic acts, for it is based on the community's own religious history and scriptural grounding that it is possible to interpret an act in light of biblical precedents, *kairos* awareness, and divinely-directed moral transformation.

Therein lies the real challenge when considering the theological and ethical grounding of contemporary prophetic acts. In a postmodern age of skepticism and questioning, can communities of faith still discern true from false prophetic acts, and fully receive prophetic acts, whether they arise from religious or non-religious sources? Is the vocabulary of prophets and prophetism no longer available to modern society, existing as it does on the "far side" of the canonical process? And if this vocabulary is truly lost, has not something fundamental been deleted from the Jewish and Christian religious traditions?

In closing, I will quote a passage found in the final chapter of James Darsey's book, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America.*

> We are plainly uncomfortable with the unverifiable and the extraordinary. We prefer the blandness of the bureaucrat to the supernal vision of the seer. Our

> cynicism prevents us from crediting claims [to] the divine. We view the prophetic tradition as remarkably naive in its faith in ultimate goodness. We prefer to look for the snake lurking behind every purported angel. Our distrust of prophets is really a reflection of a profound distrust of ourselves and our ability to tell true from false. . . .
>
> We have lost twice, because we can neither fully appreciate the motives that impelled some to speak as prophets, which alienates us from our history, nor can we expect a renascence of prophetic activity in a world that cannot warrant its fundamental assumptions, which alienates us from the possibility of a prophetic future.[20]

Darsey's conclusion is pessimistic, in that he would likely question whether the language of prophetism and the power of authentic prophetic acts are still available in contemporary society. He would argue that the danger we face today is that the religious language of prophetism and the concomitant power of prophetic acts risk being lost amid the relativism and skepticism of postmodern society. Thus, the challenge faced by faith communities is to reclaim the distinctive vocabulary of prophetic acts, so that the God of the prophets might continue to be encountered and to transform perceptions of reality, especially in today's violence-prone, postmodern society.

---

[20] James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 199, 209-10.

Bibliography

Abel, Olivier. "Pouvoir, Amour et Justice." *Études Théologiques et Religieuses* 72 no. 4 (1997): 543-556.

Abernathy, Ralph D. *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: An Autobiography.* New York: Harper & Row, 1989.

Ackerman, Peter & Christopher Kruegler. *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict.* Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1994.

Adams, James Luther. *On Being Human Religiously.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1976.

_____. *Paul Tillich's Philosophy of Culture, Science, and Religion.* New York: Harper & Row, 1965.

Adams, James Luther, Wilhelm Pauck, Roger Shinn, eds. *The Thought of Paul Tillich.* San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985.

Anderson, Bernhard W. *Understanding the Old Testament*, 4th ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1986.

Anderson, Victor. "The Wrestle of Christ and Culture in Pragmatic Public Theology." *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 19 no. 2 (May 1998): 135-150.

Aristotle. *The Art of Rhetoric.* New York: Penguin Classics USA, 1991.

Auerbach, Eric. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959.

Barth, Karl. *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life: The Theological Basis of Ethics.* Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.

Bass, S. Jonathan. *Blessed are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King, Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the "Letter from Birmingham Jail."* Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2001.

Beckley, Harlan. *Passion for Justice: Retrieving the Legacies of Walter Rauschenbusch, John A. Ryan and Reinhold Niebuhr.* Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992.

_____. Review of *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, by William Schweiker. *The Journal of Religion* 77 (January 1997):168-170.

Béland, Jean-Pierre. *Finitude essentielle et aliénation existentielle dans l'oeuvre de Paul Tillich.* Quebec: Editions Bellarmin, 1995.

Bennett, Lerone, Jr., *What Manner of Man: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*. Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1976.

Betz, Brian. "Erich Fromm and the Rhetoric of Prophecy." *Central States Speech Journal* 26 no. 4 (Winter 1975): 310-315.

Betz, Hans Dieter and William Schweiker. "Concerning Mountains and Morals: A Conversation about the Sermon on the Mount." *Criterion* 36 (Spring/Summer 1997): 12-26.

Biernatzki, William E., S.J. *Roots of Acceptance: The Intercultural Communication of Religious Meanings.* Rome: Inculturation Working Papers on Living Faith and Cultures, 1991.

Blenkinsopp, Joseph. *A History of Prophecy in Israel,* 2d ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.

Boesak, Allan. *Farewell to Innocence: A Socio-Ethical Study on Black Theology and Power.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1977.

Bormann, Ernest G. *Communication Theory.* New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1980.

Bosmajian, Haig A. *The Rhetoric of Nonverbal Communication.* Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1971.

Boyd, John D. *The Function of Mimesis and Its Decline.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968.

Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988.

Bray, Rosemary. "Rosa Parks: A Legendary Moment, a Lifetime of Activism." *Ms.* 6 (November/December 1995): 45-47.

Bright, John. *Jeremiah: The Anchor Bible* 21. Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1965.

Brinkley, Douglas. *Rosa Parks.* New York: Viking Press, 2000.

Brown, Judith. *Gandhi and Civil Disobedience: The Mahatma in Indian Politics 1928-34.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Brown, Judith. *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

Brown, Roxanne. "Mother of the Movement: Nation Honors Rosa Parks with Birthday Observance." *Ebony* 43 (February, 1988): 68-72.

Bruggemann, Walter. *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile & Homecoming.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1998.

_____. *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile.* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.

Bryan, G. McLeod. *Voices in the Wilderness: Twentieth-Century Prophets Speak to the New Millennium.* Macon: Mercer University Press, 1999.

Burridge, Kenelm O. L. "Reflections on Prophecy and Prophetic Groups." *Semeia* 21 (1981): 99-102.

Buss, Martin J. "An Anthropological Perspective upon Prophetic Call Narratives." *Semeia* 21 (1981): 9-21.

_____. "On Social and Individual Aspects of Prophecy." *Semeia* 21 (1981): 121-123.

Calloway-Thomas, Carolyn, and John Louis Lucaites, eds. *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993.

Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vol. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960.

Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed California and the LAPD.* New York: Times Books, 1997.

Carroll R., Mark Daniel. *Contexts for Amos: Prophetic Poetics in Latin American Perspective.* Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 132. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992.

Carroll, Robert. *Jeremiah.* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989.

_____. *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library). London: SCM Press, 1986.

_____. *When Prophecy Failed: Cognitive Dissonance in the Prophetic Traditions of the Old Testament.* New York: Seabury Press, 1979.

Celsi, Teresa. *Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott.* Brookfield, Conn: Millbrook Press, 1991.

Chadha, Yogesh. *Gandhi: A Life.* New York: John Wiley & Son, Inc., 1997.

Champion, James W. "Tillich and the Frankfurt school: Parallels and Differences in Prophetic Criticism." *Soundings* 69 (Winter 1986): 512-530.

Cheng, Chu-Yuan. *Behind the Tiananmen Massacre: Social, Political, and Economic Ferment in China.* Boulder: Westview Press, 1990.

Clements, Ronald E. *Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracles to Canon.* Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996.

Cobb, Kelton. "Reconsidering the Status of Popular Culture in Tillich's Theology of Culture." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63 no. 1 (Spring 1995): 53-84.

Coburn, Robert. "God, Revelation, and Religious Truth: Some Themes and Problems in the Theology of Paul Tillich." *Faith and Philosophy* 13 no. 1 (Jan. 1996): 3-33.

Colaiaco, James A. *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Apostle of Militant Nonviolence.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.

Cone, James. *Black Theology and Black Power.* New York: Seabury Press, 1969.

_____. *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984.

_____. *God of the Oppressed.* Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1975.

_____. *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991.

Cragen, John F. & Donald C. Shields. "Translating scholarship into practice: Communication studies reflecting the value of theory-based research to everyday Life." *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 27 no. 2 (May 1999).

D'Agostino, Peter and David Tafler, Eds. *Transmission: Toward a Post-Television Culture.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Pub., 1995.

Dalton, Dennis. *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

Danaher, William. Review of *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, by William Schweiker. *Anglican Theological Review* 80 (Fall 1998): 645-647.

Darsey, James. *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America.* New York: New York University Press, 1997.

Daurio, Janice. Review of *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, by William Schweiker. *Faith and Philosophy* 15 (January 1998): 104-108.

Deitz, Robert. *Willful Injustice: A Post-O.J. Look at Rodney King, American Justice, and Trial by Race.* Washington: Regnery Pub., 1996.

Downing, Frederick L. *To See the Promised Land: The Faith Pilgrimage of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1986.

Eskew, Glenn T. *But for Birmingham.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

Evans, Sara, and Harry Boyte. *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, 1992.

Fairbank, John F. *Children of the Dragon: The Story of Tiananmen Square.* New York: Collier Books, 1990.

Fairclough, Adam. *Martin Luther King, Jr.* Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1995.

Ferré, Nels et al. *Paul Tillich: Retrospect and Future.* Nashville: Abingdon, 1966.

Fisher, Walter R. *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987.

Fisher, Walter, and Robert Goodman, eds. *Rethinking Knowledge: Reflections Across the Disciplines.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.

Fohrer, Georg. *Die symbolischen Handlungen der Propheten.* Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1968.

Friebel, Kelvin. *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts.* Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 283, 1999.

Frost, Brian. *Struggling to Forgive: Nelson Mandela and South Africa's Search for Reconciliation.* London: HarperCollins, 1998.

Gale, Dennis E. *Understanding Urban Unrest: From Reverend King to Rodney King.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Pub., 1996.

Gamwell, Franklin I. "Moral Realism and Religion." *The Journal of Religion* 76 (October 1993): 475-495.

Gandhi, Mohandas K. *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments With Truth.* London: Jonathan Cape, 1966.

_____. *Collected Works* 1-90. New Delhi: Delhi Publications Division, 1958 - 1984.

Garrow, David J. ed. *Atlanta Georgia, 1960-1961: Sit-ins and Student Activism.* New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989.

_____. ed. *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.* New York: Vintage Books, 1988.

_____. ed. *Birmingham, Alabama, 1956-1963: The Black Struggle for Civil Rights.* New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989.

_____. ed. *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Civil Rights Leader, Theologian, Orator.* 3 vol. New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989.

_____. ed. *The Walking City: The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955-1956.* New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989.

Gottwald, Norman K. "Problems and Promises in the Comparative Analysis of Religious Phenomena." *Semeia* 21 (1981): 103-112.

Green, Martin. *Gandhi: Voice of a New Revolution.* New York: Continuum Publishing, 1993.

Greenfield, Eloise. "Rosa Parks." *Ms.* 3 (August, 1974): 71-74.

_____. *Rosa Parks.* New York: HarperCollins, 1973.

Gutierrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics & Salvation.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973.

Hall, James. Review of *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, by William Schweiker. *Journal of Church and State* 39 (Autumn 1997): 798-799.

Hanigan, James P. *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Foundations of Nonviolence.* Lanham: University Press of America, 1984.

Herman, A. L. *Community, Violence, & Peace: Aldo Leopold, Mohandas K. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Gautama the Buddha in the Twenty-First Century.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.

Heschel, Abraham. *The Prophets.* Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1962, 1999.

Hinze, Christine Firer. *Comprehending Power in Christian Social Ethics.* Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995.

Hooker, Morna D. *The Signs of a Prophet: The Prophetic Actions of Jesus.* London: SCM Press, 1997.

Hummel, Gert, ed. *Natürliche Theologie versus Theologie der Natur? Tillich's Denken als Anstoss zum Gespräch Zwischen Theologie, Philosophie, und Naturwissenschaft.* Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994.

_____. *Das Theologische Paradox: Beiträge des V. Internationalen Paul-Tillich-Symposions in Frankfurt/Main 1994.* Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995.

_____. *Wahrheit und Geschichte – ein Dialog mit Paul Tillich: Beiträge des VI. Internationalen Paul-Tillich-Symposions in Frankfurt/Main 1996.* Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998.

Johnson, Martin P. *The Dreyfus Affair: Honour and Politics in the Belle Époque.* London: Macmillan Press, 1999.

Jonas, Hans. *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Jones, Douglas Rawlinson. *Jeremiah: The New Century Bible Commentary.* Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992.

Juckes, Tim J. *Opposition in South Africa: The Leadership of Z. K. Matthews, Nelson Mandela, and Stephen Biko.* Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1995.

The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church, 2d ed. Braamfontein: Skotaville Pub., 1986.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason,* trans. Norman Kemp Smith. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965.

Kegley, Charles W., and Robert W. Bretall, eds. *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious and Political Thought.* New York: Macmillan Co., 1956.

_____. *The Theology of Paul Tillich.* New York: Macmillan Co., 1956.

Kegley, Charles. *The Theology of Paul Tillich.* (rev. ed.) New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982.

Kelsey, David. *The Fabric of Paul Tillich's Theology.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967.

Keenan, James F. Review of *Power, Value, and Conviction: Theological Ethics in the Postmodern Age*, by William Schweiker. *Theological Studies* 61 (June 2000): 384-386.

King, Coretta Scott. *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* rev.ed. New York: Holt & Co., 1993.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Clayborne Carson, ed. New York: Warner Books, 1998.

_____. *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World.* James M. Washington, ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1992.

_____. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* James M. Washington, ed. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1986.

_____. *The Trumpet of Conscience.* New York: Harper & Row, 1967.

Klemm, David E. "Reconstruing Transcendence: A Response to Welker, Keller, Rigby, and Schweiker," in *Power, Powerlessness, and the Divine: New Inquiries in Bible and Theology*, ed. Cynthia Rigby. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997:125-134.

Kretzschmar, Louise. *The Voice of Black Theology in South Africa.* Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1986.

Kudlinski, Kathleen. *Rosa Parks: Young Rebel.* New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 2001.

Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3d ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Lakeland, Paul. *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.

Laue, James H. *Direct Action and Desegregation, 1960-1962.* New York: Carlson Publishing, 1965, 1989.

Lentz, Richard. *Symbols, the News Magazines, and Martin Luther King.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990.

Lewis, Ioan M. "Prophets and Their Publics." *Semeia* 21 (1981): 113-117.

Limburg, James. "The Prophets in Recent Study: 1967-1977" *Interpretation* 32 no. 1 (Jan 1978): 56-68.

Lindblom, J. *Prophecy in Ancient Israel.* Philadephia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962.

Long, Burke O. "Social Dimensions of Prophetic Conflict." *Semeia* 21 (1981): 31-51.

Lukes, Steven. *Power: A Radical View.* London: Macmillan Press, 1974, 1976.

Lynd, Staughton, and Alice Lynd, eds. *Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History.* Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995.

Mackey, James P. *Power and Christian Ethics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.

Maguire, Daniel. *The Moral Core of Judaism and Christianity.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.

_____. *The Moral Revolution: A Christian Humanist Vision.* San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986.

Mandela, Nelson. *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela.* Boston: Little, Brown, 1994.

_____. *Nelson Mandela Speaks: Forging a Democratic Nonracial South Africa.* New York: Pathfinder, 1993.

McCarthy, Ronald M., and Gene Sharp. *Nonviolent Action: A Research Guide.* New York: Garland Publishing, 1997.

McKelway, Alexander. *The Systematic Theology of Paul Tillich.* New York: Dell Publishing, 1964.

Meltzer, Milton, and Walter Harding. *A Thoreau Profile.* New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1962.

Meredith, Martin. *Nelson Mandela: A Biography.* London: Harmish Hamilton, 1997.

Meyer, Michael. *Several More Lives to Live: Thoreau's Political Reputation in America.* Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977.

Migsch, Herbert. *Jeremias Ackerkauf: Eine Untersuchung von Jeremia 32.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996.

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

Miller, Vincent. "Taking Consumer Culture Seriously." *Horizons* 27 no. 2 (Fall 2000): 276-295.

Mowvley, Harry. *Reading the Old Testament Prophets Today.* Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979.

Mudge, Lewis. *The Church as Moral Community: Ecclesiology and Ethics in Ecumenical Debate.* New York: Continuum Press, 1998.

Murdoch, Iris. *The Sovereignty of Good.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970.

_____. *Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues.* Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1986.

Nakhre, Anrut W. *Social Psychology of Nonviolent Action: A Study of Three Satyagrahas.* New Delhi: Chanaka Publications, 1982.

Napier, B.D. "Prophet," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible.* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962.

Neal, Arthur G. *National Trauma & Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century.* Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998.

Newport, John. *Makers of the Modern Theological Mind: Paul Tillich.* Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1984.

Niebuhr, Reinhold. *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics.* New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935.

_____. *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr.* D.B. Robertson, ed. Cleveland: World Publishing, 1967.

_____. *Moral Man and Immoral Society.* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932.

_____. *The Nature and Destiny of Man.* 2 vol. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953.

Oates, Stephen B. *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: New American Library, 1982.

Olan, Levi A. *Prophetic Faith and the Secular Age.* New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1982.

Orton, David E., ed. *Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible: Selected Studies from Vetus Testamentum.* Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2000.

Ottati, Douglas. *Reforming Protestantism: Christian Commitment in Today's World.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

Overholt, Thomas. *Channels of Prophecy: The Social Dynamics of Prophetic Activity.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989.

_____. *Cultural Anthropology and the Old Testament.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.

_____. "Jeremiah and the Nature of the Prophetic Process." *Scripture in History & Theology: Essays in Honor of J. Coert Rylaarsdam.* Arthur Merrill & Thomas Overholt, eds. Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1977.

_____. "Jeremiah 27-29: The Question of False Prophecy." *American Academy of Religion Journal* 35 no. 3 (Sept. 1967): 241-249.

_____. "Model, Meaning, and Necessity." *Semeia* 21 (1981): 129-132.

_____. "Prophecy in History: The Social Reality of Intermediation." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 48 (1990): 3-29.

_____. "Prophecy: The Problem of Cross-Cultural Comparison." *Anthropological Approaches to the Old Testament.* Bernhard Lang, ed. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985.

_____. Review of *Liturgie und Prophetisches Ich bei Jeremia* by Henning Graf Reventlow. *The Journal of Religion* 46 no. 3 (July 1966): 406-407.

_____. *The Threat of Falsehood: A Study in the Theology of the Book of Jeremiah.* Naperville: Alec Allenson, 1970.

Paris, Peter J. *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches.* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985.

Parks, Rosa. *Dear Mrs. Parks: A Dialogue with Today's Youth.* (with Gregory J. Reed). New York: Lee & Low, 1996.

_____. *I am Rosa Parks.* (with Jim Haskins). New York: Dial Books, 1997.

Parks, Rosa. *Quiet Strength: The Faith, the Hope, and the Heart of a Woman Who Changed a Nation.* (with Gregory J. Reed). Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.

_____. *Rosa Parks: My Story.* (with Jim Haskins). New York: Dial Books, 1992.

Pasewark, Kyle A. *A Theology of Power: Being Beyond Domination.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.

Petersen, David. *The Role of Israel's Prophets.* Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series 17. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981.

Pinkney, Andrea Davis. *Let It Shine: Stories of Black Women Freedom Fighters.* San Diego: Gulliver Books, 2000.

Plato. *Gorgias*, trans. Walter Hamilton. New York: Penguin Books, 1977.

Pope, Stephen J. Review of *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, by William Schweiker. *Theological Studies* 57 (September 1996): 558-560.

Porter, Jean. Review of *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, by William Schweiker. *Modern Theology* 13 (April 1997): 285-287.

Putnam, Hillary. *The Many Faces of Realism.* LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1987.

Rad, Gerhard von. *Gottes Wirken in Israel: Vorträge zum Alten Testament.* Odil H. Steck, ed. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974.

_____. *The Message of the Prophets.* New York: Harper & Row, 1967.

_____. *Old Testament Theology.* English ed., Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1962-1965.

Ramachandran, G., and T.K. Mahadevan, eds. *Gandhi: His Relevance for our Times.* New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1967.

Ramsay, William A. *Four Modern Prophets: Walter Rauschenbusch, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gustavo Gutiérrez, Rosemary Radford Ruether.* Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986.

Randle, Michael. *Civil Resistance.* London: Fontana Press, 1994.

Rasmussen, Larry. *Earth Community, Earth Ethics.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998.

_____. *Moral Fragments and Moral Community: A Proposal for Church in Society.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.

Rauschenbusch, Walter. *Christianizing the Social Order.* Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1912.

_____. *A Theology for the Social Gospel.* Nashville: Abingdon, 1945.

Reno, R. R. Review of *Power, Value, and Conviction: Theological Ethics in the Postmodern Age*, by William Schweiker. *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 21 (July 2000): 270-272.

Richardson, Robert D., Jr. *Henry David Thoreau: A Life of the Mind.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning.* Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976.

Roberts, J. Deotis. *A Black Political Theology.* Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985.

_____. *Black Theology in Dialogue.* Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987.

Robinson, Jo Ann Gibson. *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It.* David J. Garrow, ed. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987.

Rosato, Philip J. "The Prophetic Acts of Jesus, the Sacraments and the Kingdom," in *Gottes Zukunft – Zukunft der Welt.* Hermann Deuser, Gerhard Marcel Martin, Konrad Stock, Michael Welker, eds. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1986.

Rothenbuhler, Eric W. *Ritual Communication: From Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony.* London: SAGE Publications, 1998.

Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.

Schweiker, William. *Mimetic Reflections: A Study in Hermeneutics, Theology, and Ethics.* New York: Fordham University Press, 1990.

_____. *Power, Value and Conviction: Theological Ethics in the Postmodern Age.* Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998.

_____. *Responsibiilty and Christian Ethics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

_____. "Against the Skeptics: On Getting Real About Morality." *Criterion* 36 (Winter 1997): 22-31.

_____. "Beyond Imitation: Mimetic Praxis in Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Derrida." *The Journal of Religion* 68 (January 1988): 21-38.

Schweiker, William. "Consciousness and the Good: Schleiermacher and Contemporary Theological Ethics." *Theology Today* 56 (July 1999): 180-196.

_____. "Disputes and Trajectories in Responsibility Ethics." *Religious Studies Review.* 27 (January 2001): 18-24.

_____. "Divine Command Ethics and the Otherness of God," in *The Otherness of God*, ed. Orrin Summerell. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998: 246-265.

_____. "From Cultural Synthesis to Communicative Action: The Kingdom of God and Ethical Theology." *Modern Theology* 5 (July 1989): 367-387.

_____. "Having @ Toomuch.com: Property, Possession and the Theology of Culture." *Criterion* 39 (Spring/Summer 2000): 20-28.

_____. "Iconoclasts, Builders, and Dramatists: The Use of Scripture in Theological Ethics." *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1986): 129-162.

_____. "Interpretation, Teaching, and American Theological Ethics." *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1990): 283-288.

_____. "Knowing and Serving." *Criterion* 34 (Winter 1995): 15-19.

_____. "One World, Many Moralities: A Diagnosis of our Moral Situation." *Criterion* 32 (Spring 1993): 12-21.

_____. "Power and the Agency of God." *Theology Today* 52 (July 1995): 204-224.

_____. "Radical Interpretation and Moral Responsibility: A Proposal for Theological Ethics." *The Journal of Religion* 73 (October 1993): 613-637.

_____. "Sacrifice, Interpretation, and the Sacred: The Import of Gadamer and Girard for Religious Studies." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55 (Winter 1987): 791-810.

_____. "The Church as an Academy of Justice: Moral Responsibility in the World of Mammon," in *The Local Church in a Global Era: Reflections for a New Century*, eds. Max Stackhouse, Tim Dearborn, and Scott Paeth. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000:26-38.

_____. "The Fullness of Time: Reflections on the Millennium." *The Christian Century* 116 (November 3, 1999): 1052-1053.

Schweiker, William. "The Good and Moral Identity: A Theological Ethical Response to Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*." *The Journal of Religion* 72 (October 1992): 560-572.

_____. "Time as Moral Space: Moral Cosmologies, Creation, and Last Judgment," in *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Technology on Eschatology*, eds. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000:124-138.

_____. "To Dwell on the Earth: Authority and Ecumenical Theology," in *Worldviews and Warrants: Plurality and Authority in Theology.* Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987:89-112.

_____. Review of *Together Bound: God, History, and the Religious Community*, by Frank G. Kirkpatrick. *Theology Today* 52 (January 1996): 548-550.

_____. "Tradition and Criticism: Problems and Approaches in the History of Ethics." *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1992): 291-301.

_____. "Understanding Moral Meanings: On Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Ethics, " in *Christian Ethics: Problems and Prospects*, eds. Lisa Sowle Cahill and James F. Childress. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1996: 76-92.

Schweiker, William and Per M. Anderson, eds. *Worldviews and Warrants: Plurality and Authority in Theology.* Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987.

Schweiker, William and Michael Welker. "A New Paradigm of Theological and Biblical Inquiry," in *Power, Powerlessness, and the Divine: New Inquiries in Bible and Theology*, ed. Cynthia Rigby. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997:3-20.

Scott, Peter. "Prophetic Expectation." *Theology* 99 (Jan-Feb 1996): 34-45.

Sen, Amartya. *Inequality Reexamined.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.

Sharp, Gene. *The Politics of Nonviolent Action.* Boston: Porter Sargent Pub., 1973.

Shirer, William L. *Gandhi: A Memoir.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979.

Singer, Irving. *Meaning in Life: The Creation of Value.* New York: Free Press, 1992.

Slater, Peter. "Dynamic Religion, Formative Culture, and the Demonic in History." *Harvard Theological Review* 92 no. 1 (Jan. 1999): 95-110.

Snow, Malinda. "Martin Luther King's 'Letter from Birmingham Jail' as Pauline Epistle." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 71 (1985): 318-334.

Stacey, W. David. *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament.* London: Epworth Press, 1990.

Stevenson, Janet. "Rosa Parks Wouldn't Budge." *American Heritage* 23 (February, 1972): 56-85.

Stone, Ronald. *Paul Tillich's Radical Social Thought.* Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986.

Summerell, Orrin, Ed. *The Otherness of God.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998.

Tanner, Kathryn. Review of *Mimetic Reflections: A Study in Hermeneutics, Theology, and Ethics*, by William Schweiker. *The Journal of Religion* 73 (January 1993): 117-119.

Thiemann, Ronald F. *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture.* Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991.

_____. *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy.* Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1996.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Political Writings.* Nancy L. Rosenblum, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

_____. *Walden and "Civil Disobedience."* New York: New American Library, 1960.

_____. *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government.* 2d ed. William Rossi, ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992.

Tillich, Paul. *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955.

_____. *The Courage to Be.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952.

_____. *Dynamics of Faith.* New York: Harper & Row, 1957.

_____. *The Future of Religions.* New York: Harper & Row, 1966.

_____. *Love, Power and Justice.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954.

_____. *Morality and Beyond.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1963.

_____. *My Search for Absolutes.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967.

Tillich, Paul. *The New Being.* New York: Scribner's Sons, 1955.

_____. *On the Boundary: An Autobiographical Sketch.* New York: Scribner's Sons, 1966.

_____. *Perspectives on 19th and 20th Century Protestant Theology*, ed. Carl Braaten. New York: Harper & Row, 1967.

_____. *The Protestant Era.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957.

_____. *The Religious Situation.* New York: Meridian Books, 1956.

_____. *The Irrelevance and Relevance of the Christian Message.* Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1996.

_____. *The Shaking of the Foundations.* New York: Scribner's Sons, 1955.

_____. *The Socialist Decision.* New York: Harper & Row, 1977.

_____. *Systematic Theology,* 3 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951, 1957, 1963.

_____. *Theology of Culture.* London: Oxford University Press, 1959.

_____. "Beyond Religious Socialism." *The Christian Century* 66 (June 15, 1949): 732-33.

_____. "The Recovery of the Prophetic Tradition in the Reformation." *Hauptwerke: Theologische Schriften* vol. 6. Berlin: De Gruyter Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1992:319-361.

Towner, W. Sibley. "On Calling People 'Prophets' in 1970" *Interpretation.* 24 no. 4 (Oct 1970): 492-509.

Trimiew, Darryl M. *Voices of the Silenced: The Responsible Self in a Marginalized Community.* Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1993.

Tucker, Gene M. "Prophetic Speech." *Interpretation* 32 no. 1 (Jan 1978): 31-45.

Tutu, Desmond. *Hope and Suffering.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns Pub., 1983.

Vaillant, François. *La non-violence: Essai de morale fondamentale.* Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1990.

Villa-Vicencio, Charles, ed. *Theology & Violence: The South African Debate.* Johannesburg: Skotaville Pub., 1987.

Wanke, Gunther. "Jeremias Ackerkauf: Heil im Gericht?" *Prophet und Prophetbuch: Festschrift für Otto Kaiser.* Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1989.

Webb, Stephen. Review of *Power, Value, and Conviction: Theological Ethics in the Postmodern Age*, by William Schweiker. *Anglican Theological Review* 82 (Spring 2000): 431-433.

Weber, David R. *Civil Disobedience in America: A Documentary History.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978.

West, Cornel. *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity.* Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982.

_____. *Prophetic Fragments.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub., 1988.

Westermann, Claus. *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech.* Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967.

Williams, Juan. *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years 1954-1965.* New York: Penguin Books, 1987.

Wilson, Robert R. *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel.* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980.

_____. "Early Israelite Prophecy." *Interpretation* 32 no. 1 (Jan 1978): 3-16.

Wolpert, Stanley. *Gandhi's Passion: The Life and Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Woodhead, Linda. Review of *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, by William Schweiker. *The Journal of Theological Studies* 48 (April 1997): 383-384.

Zimmerli, W. "The Special Form- and Traditio-historical Character of Ezekiel's Prophecy" *Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible: Selected Studies from Vetus Testamentum.* Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2000.

Zola, Emile. *The Dreyfus Affair: 'J'accuse' and Other Writings.* Alain Pagès, ed. Eleanor Levieux, trans. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY

This is to certify that we have examined this copy
of the dissertation by

Randall K. Bush, B.Music, Diploma, M.Div.

and have found that it is complete
and satisfactory in all respects.

The dissertation has been approved by:

Christine Firer Hinze
Dr. Christine Firer Hinze, Dissertation Director, Department of Theology

Michael K. Duffey
Dr. Michael Duffey

Thomas Hughson, S.J.
Rev. Thomas Hughson, S.J.

Daniel C. Maguire
Dr. Daniel Maguire

John J. Schmitt
Dr. John Schmitt

Approved on April 22, 2003