

King, Martin Luther, Jr. (15 Jan. 1929-4 Apr. 1968), Baptist minister and civil rights leader, was born Michael King, Jr., in Atlanta, Georgia, the son of the Reverend Michael King (Martin Luther King) and Alberta Williams. Born to a family with deep roots in the African-American Baptist church and in the Atlanta black community, the younger King spent his first twelve years in the home on Auburn Avenue that his parents shared with his maternal grandparents. A block away, also on Auburn, was Ebenezer Baptist Church, where his grandfather, the Reverend Adam Daniel Williams, had served as pastor since 1894. Under Williams's leadership, Ebenezer had grown from a small congregation without a building to become one of Atlanta's prominent African-American churches. After Williams's death in 1931, his son-in-law became Ebenezer's new pastor and gradually established himself as a major figure in state and national Baptist groups. In 1934 the elder King, following the request of his own dying father, changed his name and that of his son to Martin Luther King.

King's formative experiences not only immersed him in the affairs of Ebenezer but also introduced him to the African-American social gospel tradition exemplified by his father and grandfather, both of whom were leaders of the Atlanta branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Depression-era breadlines heightened his awareness of economic inequities, and his father's leadership of campaigns against racial discrimination in voting and teachers' salaries provided a model for the younger King's own politically engaged ministry. He resisted religious emotionalism and as a teenager questioned some facets of Baptist doctrine, such as the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

During his undergraduate years at Atlanta's Morehouse College from 1944 to 1948, King gradually overcame his initial reluctance to accept his inherited calling. Morehouse president Benjamin E. Mays influenced King's spiritual development, encouraging him to view Christianity as a potential force for progressive social change. Religion professor George Kelsey exposed him to biblical criticism and, according to King's autobiographical sketch, taught him "that behind the legends and myths of the Book were many profound truths which one could not escape." King admired both educators as deeply religious yet also learned men. By the end of his junior year, such academic role models and the example of his father led King to enter the ministry. He described his decision as a response to an "inner urge" calling him to "serve God and humanity." He was ordained during his final semester at Morehouse. By this time King had also taken his first steps toward political activism. He had responded to the postwar wave of antiblack violence by proclaiming in a letter to the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution* that African Americans were "entitled to the basic rights and opportunities of American citizens." During his senior year King joined the Intercollegiate Council, an interracial student discussion group that met monthly at Atlanta's Emory University.

After leaving Morehouse, King increased his understanding of liberal Christian thought while attending Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania from 1948 to 1951. Initially uncritical of liberal theology, he gradually moved toward Reinhold Niebuhr's neoorthodoxy, which emphasized the intractability of social evil. He reacted skeptically to a presentation on pacifism by Fellowship of Reconciliation leader A. J. Muste. Moreover, by the end of his seminary studies King had become increasingly dissatisfied with the abstract conceptions of God held by some modern theologians and identified himself instead with theologians who affirmed the personality

of God. Even as he continued to question and modify his own religious beliefs, he compiled an outstanding academic record and graduated at the top of his class.

In 1951 King began doctoral studies in systematic theology at Boston University's School of Theology, which was dominated by personalist theologians. The papers (including his dissertation) that King wrote during his years at Boston displayed little originality, and some contained extensive plagiarism; but his readings enabled him to formulate an eclectic yet coherent theological perspective. By the time he completed his doctoral studies in 1955, King had refined his exceptional ability to draw upon a wide range of theological and philosophical texts to express his views with force and precision. His ability to infuse his oratory with borrowed theological insights became evident in his expanding preaching activities in Boston-area churches and at Ebenezer, where he assisted his father during school vacations.

During his stay at Boston, King also met and courted Coretta Scott, an Alabama-born Antioch College graduate who was then a student at the New England Conservatory of Music. On 18 June 1953 the two students were married in Marion, Alabama, where Scott's family lived. During the following academic year King began work on his dissertation, which he completed during the spring of 1955.

Although he considered pursuing an academic career, King decided in 1954 to accept an offer to become the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. In December 1955, when Montgomery black leaders formed the Montgomery Improvement Association to protest the arrest of NAACP official Rosa Parks for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man, they selected King to head the new group. In his role as the primary spokesman of the yearlong boycott movement, King utilized the leadership abilities he had gained from his religious background and academic training and gradually forged a distinctive protest strategy that involved the mobilization of black churches and skillful appeals for white support. As King encountered increasingly fierce white opposition, he continued his movement away from theological abstractions toward more reassuring conceptions, rooted in African-American religious culture, of God as a constant source of support. He later wrote in his book of sermons, *Strength to Love* (1963), that the travails of movement leadership caused him to abandon the notion of God as a "theological and philosophically satisfying metaphysical category" and caused him to view God as "a living reality that has been validated in the experiences of everyday life." With the encouragement of Bayard Rustin and other veteran pacifists, King also became a firm advocate of Mohandas Gandhi's precepts of nonviolence, which he combined with Christian principles.

After the Supreme Court outlawed Alabama bus segregation laws in late 1956, King sought to expand the nonviolent civil rights movement throughout the South. In 1957 he became the founding president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), formed to coordinate civil rights activities throughout the region. Publication of *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (1958) further contributed to King's rapid emergence as a national civil rights leader. Even as he expanded his influence, however, King acted cautiously. Rather than immediately seeking to stimulate mass desegregation protests in the South, King stressed the goal of achieving black voting rights when he addressed an audience at the 1957 Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom. During 1959 he increased his understanding of Gandhian ideas during a

monthlong visit to India as the guest of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Early the following year he moved his family, which now included two children, to Atlanta in order to be nearer SCLC headquarters in that city and to become co-pastor, with his father, of Ebenezer Baptist Church. (The Kings' third child was born in 1961; their fourth was born in 1963.)

Soon after King's arrival in Atlanta, the southern civil rights movement gained new impetus from the student-led lunch counter sit-in movement that spread throughout the region during 1960. The sit-ins brought into existence a new protest group, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which would often push King toward greater militancy. In October 1960 King's arrest during a student-initiated protest in Atlanta became an issue in the national presidential campaign when Democratic candidate John F. Kennedy called Coretta King to express his concern. The successful efforts of Kennedy supporters to secure King's release contributed to the Democratic candidate's narrow victory.

As the southern protest movement expanded during the early 1960s, King was often torn between the increasingly militant student activists and more cautious national civil rights leaders. During 1961 and 1962 his tactical differences with SNCC activists surfaced during a sustained protest movement in Albany, Georgia. King was arrested twice during demonstrations organized by the Albany Movement, but when he left jail and ultimately left Albany without achieving a victory, some movement activists began to question his militancy and his dominant role within the southern protest movement.

During 1963, however, King reasserted his preeminence within the African-American freedom struggle through his leadership of the Birmingham campaign. Initiated by SCLC in January, the Birmingham demonstrations were the most massive civil rights protest that had yet occurred. With the assistance of Fred Shuttlesworth and other local black leaders and with little competition from SNCC and other civil rights groups, SCLC officials were able to orchestrate the Birmingham protests to achieve maximum national impact. King's decision to intentionally allow himself to be arrested for leading a demonstration on 12 April prodded the Kennedy administration to intervene in the escalating protests. A widely quoted letter that King wrote while jailed displayed his distinctive ability to influence public opinion by appropriating ideas from the Bible, the Constitution, and other canonical texts. During May, televised pictures of police using dogs and fire hoses against demonstrators generated a national outcry against white segregationist officials in Birmingham. The brutality of Birmingham officials and the refusal of Alabama governor George C. Wallace to allow the admission of black students at the University of Alabama prompted President Kennedy to introduce major civil rights legislation.

King's speech at the 28 August 1963 March on Washington, attended by more than 200,000 people, was the culmination of a wave of civil rights protest activity that extended even to northern cities. In King's prepared remarks he announced that African Americans wished to cash the "promissory note" signified in the egalitarian rhetoric of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Closing his address with extemporaneous remarks, he insisted that he had not lost hope: "So I say to you, my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed--we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." He appropriated the familiar words of "My Country

'Tis of Thee" before concluding, "And when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children--black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants--will be able to join hands and to sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last.' "

King's ability to focus national attention on orchestrated confrontations with racist authorities, combined with his oration at the 1963 March on Washington, made him the most influential African-American spokesperson of the first half of the 1960s. Named *Time* magazine's man of the year at the end of 1963, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1964. The acclaim King received strengthened his stature among civil rights leaders but also prompted Federal Bureau of Investigation director J. Edgar Hoover to step up his effort to damage King's reputation. Hoover, with the approval of President Kennedy and Attorney General Robert Kennedy, established phone taps and bugs. Hoover and many other observers of the southern struggle saw King as controlling events, but he was actually a moderating force within an increasingly diverse black militancy of the mid-1960s. As the African-American struggle expanded from desegregation protests to mass movements seeking economic and political gains in the North as well as the South, King's active involvement was limited to a few highly publicized civil rights campaigns, particularly the major series of voting rights protests that began in Selma, Alabama, early in 1965, which secured popular support for the passage of national civil rights legislation, particularly the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The Alabama protests reached a turning point on 7 March when state police attacked a group of demonstrators at the start of a march from Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery. Carrying out Governor Wallace's orders, the police used tear gas and clubs to turn back the marchers soon after they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge on the outskirts of Selma. Unprepared for the violent confrontation, King was in Atlanta to deliver a sermon when the incident occurred but returned to Selma to mobilize nationwide support for the voting rights campaign. King alienated some activists when he decided to postpone the continuation of the Selma-to-Montgomery march until he had received court approval, but the march, which finally secured federal court approval, attracted several thousand civil rights sympathizers, black and white, from all regions of the nation. On 25 March King addressed the arriving marchers from the steps of the capitol in Montgomery. The march and the subsequent killing of a white participant, Viola Liuzzo, dramatized the denial of black voting rights and spurred passage during the following summer of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

After the successful voting rights march in Alabama, King was unable to garner similar support for his effort to confront the problems of northern urban blacks. Early in 1966 he launched a major campaign against poverty and other urban problems, moving into an apartment in the black ghetto of Chicago. As King shifted the focus of his activities to the North, however, he discovered that the tactics used in the South were not as effective elsewhere. He encountered formidable opposition from Mayor Richard Daley and was unable to mobilize Chicago's economically and ideologically diverse black community. King was stoned by angry whites in the Chicago suburb of Cicero when he led a march against racial discrimination in housing. Despite numerous mass protests, the Chicago campaign resulted in no significant gains and undermined King's reputation as an effective civil rights leader.

King's influence was further undermined by the increasingly caustic tone of black militancy of the period after 1965. Black militants increasingly turned away from the Gandhian precepts of King toward the black nationalism of Malcolm X, whose posthumously published autobiography and speeches reached large audiences after his assassination in February 1965. Unable to influence the black insurgencies that occurred in many urban areas, King refused to abandon his firmly rooted beliefs about racial integration and nonviolence. He was nevertheless unpersuaded by black nationalist calls for racial uplift and institutional development in black communities. In his last book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967), King dismissed the claim of Black Power advocates "to be the most revolutionary wing of the social revolution taking place in the United States," but he acknowledged that they responded to a psychological need among African Americans he had not previously addressed. "Psychological freedom, a firm sense of self-esteem, is the most powerful weapon against the long night of physical slavery," King wrote. "The Negro will only be truly free when he reaches down to the inner depths of his own being and signs with the pen and ink of assertive selfhood his own emancipation proclamation."

Indeed, even as his popularity declined, King spoke out strongly against American involvement in the Vietnam War, making his position public in an address on 4 April 1967 at New York's Riverside Church. King's involvement in the antiwar movement reduced his ability to influence national racial policies and made him a target of further FBI investigations. Nevertheless, he became ever more insistent that his version of Gandhian nonviolence and social gospel Christianity was the most appropriate response to the problems of black Americans.

In November 1967 King announced the formation of the Poor People's Campaign, designed to prod the federal government to strengthen its antipoverty efforts. King and other SCLC workers began to recruit poor people and antipoverty activists to come to Washington, D.C., to lobby on behalf of improved antipoverty programs. This effort was in its early stages when King became involved in a sanitation workers' strike in Memphis, Tennessee. On 28 March 1968, as King led thousands of sanitation workers and sympathizers on a march through downtown Memphis, black youngsters began throwing rocks and looting stores. This outbreak of violence led to extensive press criticisms of King's entire antipoverty strategy. King returned to Memphis for the last time in early April. Addressing an audience at Bishop Charles J. Mason Temple on 3 April, King affirmed his optimism despite the "difficult days" that lay ahead. "But it doesn't matter with me now," he declared, "because I've been to the mountaintop [and] I've seen the promised land." He continued, "I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land." The following evening King was assassinated as he stood on a balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. A white segregationist, James Earl Ray, was later convicted of the crime. The Poor People's Campaign continued for a few months after his death but did not achieve its objectives.

Until his death King remained steadfast in his commitment to the radical transformation of American society through nonviolent activism. In his posthumously published essay, "A Testament of Hope" (1986), he urged African Americans to refrain from violence but also warned, "White America must recognize that justice for black people cannot be achieved without radical changes in the structure of our society." The "black revolution" was more than a civil

rights movement, he insisted. "It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws--racism, poverty, militarism and materialism."

After her husband's death, Coretta Scott King established the Atlanta-based Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change to promote Gandhian-Kingian concepts of nonviolent struggle. She led the successful effort to honor King with a federal holiday on the anniversary of his birthday, which was first celebrated in 1986.

Bibliography

Collections of King's papers are at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta and the Mugar Memorial Library at Boston University. King's writings are collected in James Melvin Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1986). Biographies include David Levering Lewis, *King: A Biography*, 2d ed. (1978); Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1982); and David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1955-1968* (1986). See also two works by Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (1988) and *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65* (1998). An obituary is in the *New York Times*, 5 Apr. 1968.

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Online Resources

- The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project
<http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/>
From Stanford University.
- The Nobel Peace Prize 1964
<http://www.nobel.se/peace/laureates/1964/>
From the Nobel e-Museum, the Official Web Site of The Nobel Foundation.

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