



“Letter from Birmingham Jail”: From World to Word

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We cling to momentous words, drawn to the wholeness they embody—born in the tangle of human events, and yet, it would seem, not simply of them. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” bears this promise, but the story of its composition is more complicated, the route to its final form more intricate, and its legacy more complex than is commonly observed. There’s much to learn from these intricacies and complexities.

HOW “LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL” CAME TO BE WRITTEN

In January 1963, as Alabama Governor George Wallace declared “a line in the dust . . . segregation today . . . segregation tomorrow . . . segregation forever,”¹ planning began on a desegregation campaign in Birmingham, Alabama, to be led by Dr. King under the auspices of the Southern Christian Leadership conference (SCLC).

There was a strategic connection between the Birmingham campaign and an inconclusive effort in Albany, Georgia, the previous year, but the roots of “Letter

¹ George Wallace, Inaugural Address, January 14, 1963, see “‘Segregation Forever’: A Fiery Pledge Forgiven, but Not Forgotten,” *All Things Considered*, NPR, January 10, 2013, <https://tinyurl.com/y83xzjmd>.

One of the most famous twentieth-century letters from prison was that of Martin Luther King Jr. This article surveys the background and genesis of his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and reflects on its thematic connections to the Pauline prison epistles and how the world becomes word.

from Birmingham Jail” lead back to Albany as well, and *its* city jail. In July 1962, King and Associate SCLC Director Ralph Abernathy were given belated forty-five-day jail sentences for parading in Albany without a permit. While in jail, a two-page statement by King appeared in the *Amsterdam News* under the title “A Message from Jail.” A *New York Times* reporter had contacted the SCLC at approximately the same time to suggest that King write a letter from jail, to appear in the *Times*. The connection between the request from the *Times* and the statement in the *Amsterdam News* is unclear, but the *Times*’ request was declined, on the advice of attorney Chauncey Eskridge and a consulting public relations specialist from Billy Graham’s staff; declined, but apparently not forgotten.²

Demonstrations in Birmingham, led by Dr. King, began in early April 1963.³ Movement leaders had come to a preliminary understanding that if a court order blocking demonstrations were issued, it would be disobeyed, a step previously not taken by the SCLC. On April 12 (Good Friday and the fourth day of Passover) King and others were arrested for violating the anticipated court order and taken to Birmingham City Jail, where King was placed in solitary confinement.

That same day, a group of white clergymen met to compose a statement critical of the SCLC campaign. In January, they had been among eleven local clergy to issue a statement condemning violence by segregationists and calling for peaceful compliance with desegregation orders.⁴ Their new statement, like the one in January, would appeal for “law and order and common sense,” but this time it was directed against the SCLC-led initiative. In the opening paragraph, the clergymen indicated that their previous opposition to segregationist lawlessness should be taken into account in weighing their current appeal, but this suggestion of symmetry would prove, instead, a glaring weakness. References to “our” Negro citizens no doubt rankled as well.

The clergymen’s statement appeared in Birmingham’s two daily newspapers the next day, the *Birmingham News* running the appeal under a photo of King, Abernathy, and other demonstrators, with the headline “White Clergymen Urge Local Negroes to Withdraw from Demonstrations.”⁵

The appeal was not directed specifically to Dr. King, nor did it question the SCLC’s ultimate objectives. Nevertheless, campaign leaders quickly saw it as an opportunity to seize the rhetorical high ground, and King was secretly provided a copy. A statement by other leaders of the campaign, or the leadership as a whole,

² During this period, Graham and King maintained a largely unpublicized but mutually supportive relationship. See Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–1963* (New York: Touchstone, 1988), 602. A third, very short “Letter from Jail,” composed in expectation of King’s arrest in Selma, Alabama, in February 1965 appeared as part of an SCLC fundraising advertisement in the *New York Times* on February 5, the day King was released.

³ A year earlier, a student-led effort in Birmingham with similar goals had met with considerable success, but by the beginning of 1963 the progress made had largely eroded under pressure from Eugene “Bull” Connor, Birmingham’s public safety commissioner.

⁴ 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), 233.

⁵ For the full text of the Appeal, see Bass, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*, 235.

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THE TEXT AND CONTEXT OF THE LETTER

The complex history of "Letter from Birmingham Jail" brings to mind Marcus Borg's distinction between an inert construction of historical "background" and appreciation of a dynamic, interactive relationship between a document and its historical "context."⁶ "Letter from Birmingham Jail" comes with context.

Published versions of the letter give the impression that it was composed in its entirety during King's incarceration. In fact, it passed through several iterations, beginning with notes secreted out of his jail cell and culminating in a final version many months later. At least five stages of composition can be identified:

1. King began a written response to the clergymen's statement while held in the Birmingham City Jail, from April 12 to April 20, 1963. Passages were written on the margins of the newspaper the appeal had run in, pieces of toilet paper, scraps, and paper brought to King during visits by members of his staff. At the outset of the demonstrations, a manifesto had been issued by the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, the local SCLC affiliate. Summarizing the goals of the campaign in approximately seven hundred words, it foreshadowed many of the letter's subsequent themes.
2. King's notes were passed to trusted visitors, to be assembled and typed at campaign headquarters. The difficulties he faced—the anxieties and indignities of solitary confinement, lack of light and paper, the need to write in fragments—along with problems deciphering his handwriting and editorial intentions, led to considerable inference and guesswork. Transcription was largely in the hands of SCLC Executive Director Wyatt T. Walker and his secretary Willie Pearl Mackey,⁷ who later recalled that her first drafts were relayed back to King for comments and corrections.

⁶ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word: The New Testament in the Order the Books Were Written* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012), 5–6.

⁷ A slightly different text, typed on a different typewriter, was apparently put together at approximately the same time by Rose White, an employee of Miles College, at the request of Addine Drew, one of King's friends in Birmingham. Bass, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*, 138.

- Unfortunately, nothing written in jail in King's hand survives, apparently having been discarded as it was transcribed.
3. Between his release on April 20 and its initial distribution at the beginning of May, King, along with SCLC staff members, continued to edit and revise the text. In a phone conversation during this period, tapped by the FBI, King indicated that drafts had swelled to three times the size of the roughly seven-thousand-word versions that would be distributed by the SCLC and American Friends Service Committee in May, and published in *The New Leader*, *Liberation*, and *Christian Century* in June.⁸ The nature and fate of this additional material is unclear.
 4. The *Christian Century* edition of the letter differed significantly from other versions published in May and June. Associate editor Dean Peerman oversaw the editorial process. One significant change, however, initiated by editor Harold Fey, was opposed by Peerman. In a letter to Dr. King dated May 22, Fey suggested that the names of the eight clergymen be deleted from the heading, in as much as the letter's import extended far beyond Birmingham. The recommendation was apparently convincing, as the text published in *Christian Century* did not include the names.⁹
 5. *Why We Can't Wait*, a collection of essays by King published in January 1964, included a final version of the letter. In an accompanying comment King noted, "Although the text remains in substance unaltered, I have indulged in the author's prerogative of polishing it for publication."¹⁰ In fact, the text closely followed the version published in *Christian Century* the previous June.¹¹

In addition to numerous minor editorial corrections, whole passages included in other versions do not appear in the *Christian Century* and *Why We Can't Wait* editions of the letter. So, for example, after equating the misbegotten advice that movement members "Wait!" with an implicit "Never" (the clergyman's appeal had characterized the demonstrations as "untimely"), early versions include a reference to thalidomide, a drug for nausea during pregnancy that was taken off the market in 1961, having been linked to severe congenital disorders. Referring to this advice, the early versions continue, "It has been a tranquilizing thalidomide; relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration."

⁸ Bass, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*, 136.

⁹ The author has seen a copy of Fey's letter. King's relationship with *Christian Century* preceded publication of the "Letter from Birmingham Jail," having served as an editor-at-large for several years. To the best of Peerman's knowledge, none of the staff at *Christian Century* were aware of the publication of the letter elsewhere. (Personal communication, Dean Peerman, July 3–7, 2011). The author expresses his deep appreciation to Dean Peerman for his generous assistance.

¹⁰ Martin Luther King, *Why We Can't Wait*, The King Legacy (Boston: Beacon, 2010), 85.

¹¹ Diverging from the *Christian Century* text, the names of the eight clergymen appear in an appended "Author's Note."

Other passages left out of later versions also were apparently deemed strained (e.g., a deleted passage between paragraphs 37 and 38 employing a taillight/headlight metaphor) or too jolting (an explicit reference to the racist abuse shouted at six-year-old Ruby Bridges as she entered a previously all-white New Orleans elementary school).

Particularly intriguing was the replacement of several references to "we" and "our" with "I" and "my," once again beginning with the *Christian Century* version. The first of these changes is in the letter's opening sentence, where "my" was substituted for "'our' present activities." The singulars would more effectively convey the message that the letter, originating from the cell of an eminent prisoner, stood in a long tradition of prison epistles.

Nevertheless, the pivotal passage of the letter remained virtually unchanged in all versions, a single sentence of over three hundred words that begins "But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers . . .", goes on to survey the reprehensible realities faced daily by African Americans, and concludes, with striking understatement: "I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience."

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Given this complex history, it is not surprising that after King's death a confusing trail of texts reemerged, as differing versions of the letter were republished.

SOURCES AND REFERENCES

The "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is replete with supportive citations and exemplars, thirty references in all. The assemblage is remarkable for its range and erudition, but also for who is, and isn't, included. With the exception of references to James Meredith and Mother Pollard, the unnamed woman quoted as remarking, "My feets is tired, but my soul is rested [1964 version: is at rest]," none of the exemplars or authors, identified or unattributed,¹² are African Americans. What the references do have in common is the strong likelihood that the great majority of those cited would have been included in the clergymen's own lists of unassailable

¹² Keith D. Miller identifies a number of passages in the letter that appear to lean heavily on unattributed sources. In particular, Miller demonstrates King's use of printed sermons by several prominent early to mid-twentieth-century white Protestant figures. Uncited references, apparently drawn from H. E. Fosdick's published sermons, are especially prevalent in the letter (paragraphs 4, 40, and 43). See Keith D. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Its Sources* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998).

authorities.¹³ In laying claim to these particular references in support of his position, King is proposing that if there is a source of “tension” to confront, it is located *within* those he addresses, rather than *between* him and them, a rhetorical strategy he had also employed in his 1958 essay “My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence.” The argument at the heart of the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” issues largely from these personages, gathered about him “while confined here in the Birmingham City Jail.” This approach is also reflected in his contrasting characterization of “Elijah Muhammad’s Muslim movement” as made up of people who have “lost faith in America, [and] who have absolutely repudiated Christianity.” In framing his own argument, instead, in terms of “what is best in the American dream and . . . the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage,” King implies that if the clergymen undid the contradictions between their actions and their regard for these sources, they could only conclude that the position *he* was advancing must be theirs as well.

This aspect of the letter may also be related to the emendation of pronouns noted above. The move to first person singulars conveys both King’s physical isolation *and* his spiritual proximity to those among his sources who had found themselves in comparable circumstances, most notably the apostle Paul, the most frequently referenced figure in the letter.¹⁴ King first draws a parallel between his circumstances and Paul’s in the third paragraph, leading to his identification with Paul’s “Macedonian call.”¹⁵ Paul-as-prisoner is alluded to once again near the middle of the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” in connection with the all too common advice from “white moderates” to “wait for a more convenient season.” The allusion is to Acts 24:25, where the Roman governor Felix dismisses Paul, who remains under arrest, with the comment, “When I have a convenient season, I will call for thee” (KJV). Paul is referenced once more by name in the litany of “creative extremists” and cited near the conclusion of the letter when King notes the Christian ideal of a “colony of Heaven” (Phil 3:20).

Paul would almost certainly have come near the top of the Christian clergymen’s lists of exemplary figures, but the repeated evocation of his life and writings suggests something more. The emended pronouns, along with the references and allusions, invoke Paul’s itinerant and incarcerated presence. The clergymen’s appeal noted that the demonstrations were “directed and led in part by outsiders,” including King, and called for a reassertion of leadership “by citizens of our

¹³ Movement supporters Ann Braden and Sarah Patton Boyle, both of whom were white, and a reference to the Boston Tea Party were added to the 1964 text. That Augustine is cited immediately before Thomas Aquinas, Martin Buber, and Paul Tillich, suggests it was his role as a churchman rather than his North African heritage that was uppermost in King’s mind. There are also no explicit references to Thoreau or Gandhi, though their words and actions appear to inform numerous passages.

¹⁴ Socrates is referenced three times.

¹⁵ The first reference to Paul includes the description of Tarsus as a “little village,” later shortened to “village,” though in Acts 21:39 Paul is quoted as emphasizing that Tarsus was, in fact “not an insignificant city.” The discrepancy appears to be related to the preceding reference to “the prophets of the eighth century BC” having left “their little villages,” also subsequently shortened to “villages.” The implication would seem to be that the prophets and apostles with whom King identifies came from the “common folk.”

own metropolitan area.” In identifying his mission with Paul’s, King turned these arguments back on the clergymen.

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THE LEGACY OF THE LETTER

The significance of “Letter from Birmingham Jail” is evident for those who continue to identify with the events and issues that gave rise to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and ’60s. The courage and determination of activists, despite the ever-present risk of jail and deadly violence—Birmingham’s Sixteenth Street Baptist Church would be bombed in September 1963—the frustrating struggle to catalyze liberal good intentions into active support, and the sense of climactic crisis surrounding the Birmingham campaign merge in memory with the letter’s enduring rhetorical power.

In addition, the need to place the movement within the larger fabric of American history has highlighted the importance of documents that can facilitate the desegregation of the American *story*. In casting the light of prophetic faith and democratic values on American racism, the letter is a fitting companion to other classic American documents of reproof and hope. As King concluded, one day it would be recognized that the movement brought America “back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.”

However, classics may also be claimed by people and movements that have little in common with the events and issues with which they were originally associated. If, for example, Barry Goldwater didn’t intend a connection between his defense of extremism at the 1964 Republican National Convention (“extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice! . . . moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue!”) and King’s homage to “extremists” for love and justice in the letter, others in the “New Right” did. Regarding demonstrations at the 2008 Democratic National Convention, Randall Terry, founder of the anti-abortion organization Operation Rescue, would declare, “Operation Rescue is taking its cues from the ‘Letter from the Birmingham Jail’ by Martin Luther King Jr. We are deliberately creating social tension in order to highlight the grave evil of legalized child-killing. Those who condemn our tactics might forgo celebrating Marin [*sic*] Luther King day.”¹⁶

¹⁶ “Party Crashers; Randall Terry, Founder of Operation Rescue, Announces Civil Disobedience Times and Forums to Disrupt DNC Events,” Christian News Wire, August 22, 2008, <https://tinyurl.com/ya63v78q>. In a 2009 interview, Terry declared “I watched a TV series called ‘Eyes on the Prize,’ about Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement. I read the letter from the Birmingham jail. . . . I read Coretta Scott King’s

Terry's claim on the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" reflects a problem with classic documents in general. As Plato noted, once something is put into writing "it rolls all over the place."¹⁷ King's defense of civil disobedience, his reference to Augustine's assertion that "an unjust law is no law at all," his praise of "creative extremists," ought to be read, first of all, in their particular context—but have also been read otherwise.

Iconography favors simplicity. Wyatt T. Walker's memorable photo of King gazing through the bars of a Birmingham jail cell is commonly associated with his arrest in April 1963, but was in fact taken four years later, when, in compliance with a Supreme Court ruling upholding his conviction for violating the court order, he returned to Birmingham to serve five additional days. Similarly, the conflated narrative commonly associated with "Letter from Birmingham Jail" tells the story of a single text, completed in a unique moment of inspiration. Such a narrative pushes lived context into the background,¹⁸ along with lessons that might be learned from how and why the text continued to evolve in the months following Dr. King's release.

Much is lost when the history of momentous words is foreshortened, even when their message bespeaks greatness. The intricacies of "Letter from Birmingham Jail" would have been for naught if it hadn't begun as the response of a singular figure in an unlit cell who had had enough of the "responsible" and "realistic" advice of fellow clergy. And yet, the eight clergymen, who saw themselves as relatively progressive and open-minded, would subsequently share the feeling that they had been misunderstood, and that their statement had been misused. Perhaps some Philippians had felt similarly. But just as the clergymen's appeal had not been written to Dr. King, his reply wasn't really intended for the clergymen. Though their names appeared at the head of early versions of the letter, it was released for mass distribution and publication without having been sent to them.

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Both the appeal and the letter were intended, in fact, for a larger public. In the case of the letter, that public would extend, as Harold Fey predicted, far beyond and long after Birmingham 1963. While the letter emerged as a classic, the appeal would largely pass into public memory, if remembered at all, as a foil for King's

biography. . . . I realized that if we were going to end child killing, we had to take our instructions from playbooks in the past that had been victorious." Aaron Steiner, "We Will Make This a Circus," *The Observer*, July 20, 2009, <https://tinyurl.com/y7u43gvw>.

¹⁷ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275e.

¹⁸ Jonathan Bass's *Blessed Are the Peacemakers* is an informative exception to this tendency. An appended "Documentary Edition" of the letter specifies emendations of earlier versions.

reply—its signers, ever after, bearing the responsibility for one and the onus for the other.

“Letter from Birmingham Jail” was born in context, and then borne beyond it. Great documents emerge in their time and come from their time, and yet, appear not entirely of their time. They are the world made word. ⊕

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