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## Tomorrow Will Shine

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# Tomorrow Will Shine

## Submitted by Geoffrey Griffiths



Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" shares remarkable similarities with the books *Hosea*, *Jonah*, and *Amos* from the Old Testament. By comparing these writings, we discover not only what makes a prophet and why they arise, but we also discover the general pattern that prophets follow in their efforts to bring about change. The prophets of old, such as Hosea, Jonah, and Amos were the messengers of God, and were usually "outsiders" with an innate calling to reform social and moral injustice. At first, the prophets of old appeared reluctant because they were undertaking a dangerous journey; however, with the help of God, they brought the message that all people could earn forgiveness and salvation if they changed their ways. Martin Luther King Jr. can be seen as a modern prophet, and perhaps he recognized this because he likens himself to the prophets of old. King reminds us that prophets are still needed to fix the injustices and immorality of contemporary society.

Humans have inhabited the Earth for millions of years, and, unfortunately, universal human rights are still not guaranteed to all people. Freedom is not "ringing" everywhere, not even in modern times. Within the past century, the world has witnessed some of the worst dehumanizing events, including the repression of women, the oppression of African Americans, and the vic-

timization of people during the Holocaust. In 1948, the United Nations introduced the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" in an attempt to create a standard, whereby all human beings can be treated with respect and dignity (1). Yet, human rights violations still occur today. This can change. The answer is in speaking out against discrimination and cruelty. Conditions cannot change, if people remain silent. Ultimately, human rights and human flourishing come through the tireless efforts of people willing to put their lives on the line to combat injustice. These people are prophets. They are people, like Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Henry David Thoreau, and Martin Luther King Jr.—people who exercised their freedom of speech to rise above injustice. They appear in the eighth century B.C., and they still appear today.

Marvin Perry, author of Western Civilization: A Brief History, conveys that prophets are "outsiders" that bring messages of social change and "attack oppression, cruelty, greed, and exploitation" (29). In other words, prophets are "outside" of the corrupt, immoral, and faithless population—whether it is because they come in from a foreign area or because they are not taking part in the sins or violations of the majority. Perry asserts that prophets, "often emerge in times of social distress and moral confusion" and "plea for a return to the covenant

and law” (29). Prophets are needed when things are not going well or when people have strayed from morality. The prophets of old emerged, when people sinned against God by disobeying the Ten Commandments. It was the job of the prophets of old to educate people about their sins and to bring an end to decadence. In contemporary society, to follow God’s way is analogous to being morally good in thought and action. No religion is required to do what is not only good for you, but also to do what will benefit others. To borrow an idea from the philosopher, Immanuel Kant, we should “treat everyone as an end in themselves, and not a means to an end.” More simply, all people should be treated with respect.

Hosea, Jonah, and Amos are three of the prophets of old, and they represent some of the earliest human and civil rights activists. The prophet Hosea comes from the north and entered the southern population of Israel because the people have been showing “no faithfulness or kindness and no knowledge of God in the land; there was swearing, lying, killing, stealing, and committing adultery” (Revised Standard Version, Hos. 4.2). Hosea used an analogy of his personal life to convey the message of God. Hosea’s wife, Gomer, has committed adultery and has “played the harlot,” just as the people of Israel have “left their God to play the harlot” (Hos. 1.2). A second prophet, Jonah, also represents an “outsider,” when he is commanded by God to “go to Nineveh that great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before me” (Jon. 1.2). Jonah tried to escape on a ship, but God “hurled a great wind

upon the sea” to prevent him. This reminds us that the prophets of old were doing the work of God and that God remained in control as the ultimate moral judge of humans (Jon. 1.15). More universally, no person has the authority over anyone else. People must act responsibly, and must consider the consequences to other people before acting.

Amos, a shepherd from Judea, brought the sins to the attention of the people of the different villages of Israel. He relayed God’s message to Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Judah, and several other villages that, “God will not revoke the punishment” for their “transgressions” (Amos 1.3). Amos declared that the people have forsaken their humbleness before God and have adopted a life of self-indulgence. They have become people who “oppress the poor, who crush the needy” in favor of materialistic needs, such as alcohol and wealth (Amos 4.1). This criticism originates from the transition from tribal society to settled civilizations that occurred in Israel during the Eighth Century B.C. The transition resulted in class distinctions. With this development, the wealthy Hebrew Kings began to mistreat the poor (Perry 29). For the prophets, this type of “national misfortune was an opportunity for penitence and reform” (Perry 29).

Prophets have an innate calling—whether from God or within themselves—to undertake the dangerous job of being the “gadfly” according to Socrates, and to speak out against injustice. According to Perry, prophets are people who “felt compelled to act as God’s messengers” (29). The prophets sought something beyond the law, they sought “a deeper spiritual insight or a zeal for morality in daily life” (Perry 30). Hosea

loved Israel and felt compelled to carry the word of God throughout the land to deliver the land that he loved so much from the “deep corruption” (Hos. 9.3). Hosea was “the watchman of Ephraim [Israel]” (Hos. 9.8). As the “watchman,” it was his job to prevent corruption from sweeping across Israel. It was his job to cry out against injustice, and to stand in the way of the oppressors of the weak.

Similarly, God called upon Jonah to “proclaim the message that I tell you” to the city of Nineveh on several occasions (Jon. 3.2). However, Jonah illustrates that prophets may not be fully prepared to carry out their calling; they need the guidance of God, or some other moral judge. After the first call of God, Jonah set sail on a ship and ignored his calling, which caused God to send a treacherous storm to remind Jonah of his purpose (Jon. 1.13). Along the journey, prophets can stray from their noble cause, and adopt a selfish lifestyle, leading to the emergence of false prophets. True prophets are altruistic, and seek the betterment of humankind, not just themselves. Just as Jonah was “thrown into” being a prophet, he was thrown into the sea, swallowed by a fish, and delivered to Nineveh to continue his role (Jon. 1). The prophet Amos also felt a moral obligation to relay God’s message to the people of Israel. In chapter three, Amos called for the people to “hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you.” It was his duty to warn the people that their sinful lifestyles and mistreatment of the poor would result in punishments from God unless they changed their ways (Jon. 3.5).

Being a prophet is a dangerous job.

In the Eighth century B.C., Hosea, Jonah, and Amos faced persecution, imprisonment, ostracism, and other atrocities for speaking out against the sins of the majority. In other words, they spoke out against human rights violations. What if people did not embrace the messages of the prophets? Would God protect the prophets and punish the people as was described? These questions may never be fully answered; yet, in many cases the prophets did face persecution. Hosea, Jonah, and Amos may have remained relatively unscathed in the end; however, others may not have been so fortunate. Prophets fulfill their role no matter what the consequences are—perhaps it is because they are “caught up by the *Zeitgeist*,” or the spirit of the time, especially during times of crisis as Martin Luther King Jr. illustrates (King 5).

Prophets bring a message of forgiveness, salvation, and hope for the future. If the people follow the message of the prophets, then God will have mercy on them. According to Perry, the prophets believed that, “life on earth could be improved, that poverty and injustice need not be accepted as part of an unalterable natural order, and that the individual was capable of elevating himself or herself morally and could respect the dignity of others” (Perry 30). The denial of human rights can be reversed, the mistreatment of people can be stopped, and the conditions of society can change with some effort. In *Hosea*, God revealed that he “would heal their faithlessness” if the people repented (Hos. 14.5). Hosea conveyed that God “would be as the dew to Israel; he shall blossom as the lily, he shall strike root as the poplar” (Hos. 14.6). In *Jonah*, after the people repented and had “turned from their

evil way,” God did not punish them, and instead commended them on their actions (Jon. 3.10). Amos also related that, “as the shepherd rescued from the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel who dwell in Samaria be rescued” (Amos 3.12). In other words, Hosea, Jonah, and Amos illustrate that change can occur and that good behavior will be rewarded.

Similar to the prophets of the Old Testament, Martin Luther King Jr. represents the “outsider” bringing messages to a sinful population when he travels to Birmingham and throughout the entire South. James A. Colaiaco relates that, “King [actually] compares himself to the prophets of the Old and New Testaments of the Bible” (4). In the third paragraph of the “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” King states that he is “in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their ‘thus saith the Lord’ far beyond the boundaries of their home towns” (King, 1). Although, Martin Luther King Jr. may be called an “outsider” to Birmingham, he is “in Birmingham by affiliation and by invitation” with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to “participate in nonviolent efforts to secure equal rights for blacks” (Colaiaco 4). King may not live in Birmingham, but he belongs there because Birmingham is the center of injustice, and it is his calling to end it.

Martin Luther King Jr. is a prophet who is responding to racial injustice and the mistreatment of African Americans, as well as all people of color. King calls for an end

to the immoral practices of segregation. In fact, King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” was written in response to a document published by “Alabama clergymen charging that the recent direct actions in the city had been ‘unwise and untimely’” (Colaiaco 2). The Alabama clergymen refer to the recent “anti-segregation” demonstrations and boycotts led by Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights activists (Colaiaco 1). King and others were left with few options except to undertake a nonviolent campaign to combat the segregation, brutality, and “grossly unjust treatment in courts” of African Americans (King 1). Civil disobedience, similar to that of Mahatma Gandhi, was the best option because a violent campaign would only escalate the problems. Perhaps, the only right that should be denied to people is the right to harm others. Treating others with brutality because of their appearance or beliefs benefits no one.

Martin Luther King Jr. adamantly pronounces his moral calling to rise up against justice when he writes that, “there comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men [and women] are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair” (King 3). King asserts that the injustices occurring in Birmingham have continued far too long and believes that it is his duty, as well as the duty of everyone affected by racial discrimination to speak up against it. Colaiaco supports King’s assertions when he writes, “As long as blacks throughout the nation were denied justice and equality, the dream embodied in America’s Declaration of Independence and the Constitution would remain unfulfilled” (3).

In addition to the civil laws of a society, there are “higher laws” that apply to every community, religion, and government. They are the moral laws, such as treating people equally. That is why “segregation is not only politically, economically, and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and awful” (King 3). King’s calling extends far beyond any law or written rule and it delves into a moral obligation. As is written in the “Declaration of the Independence of the United States of America,” everyone in western society is given certain “inalienable rights” for “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” and everyone in western society is protected by natural laws against mistreatment, discrimination, and enslavement. These are the very rights being denied in Birmingham through the practice of segregation. Martin Luther King Jr. “cannot sit idly by in Atlanta,” while this is occurring because “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (King 1). Injustice in Birmingham stands in the way of justice in other places. The oppressors in Birmingham must be dealt with, otherwise oppression will continue indefinitely. As Immanuel Kant writes in *Perpetual Peace*, “A transgression in one place is felt everywhere” (119). Mistreatment and denial of rights of people based on race, color, gender, ethnic background, or appearance is felt by all people.

The role of a prophet is a struggle, but change often “comes through the tireless efforts of men [and women] willing to be coworkers with God” (King 5). Martin Luther King Jr. and many of his contemporaries during the Civil Rights Movement faced

unimaginable horrors during their nonviolent campaigns and acts of civil disobedience (Colaiaco 6). Homes of African Americans and white sympathizers were burned to the ground, prominent Civil Rights leaders were shot down, and families were torn apart. During some of the “freedom rides,” many men and women “suffered savage beatings” (Colaiaco 6). Even King was jailed about a dozen times for bringing the message of peace and demanding an end to suffering, just as the prophets before him had done.

Although immediate results may not be seen, positive change likely prevails with the efforts of prophets. Tragically, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968, before he could see the full result of his efforts. King eventually was victorious in Birmingham, and his efforts represent a “turning point in the battle for civil rights, after which the forces of segregation in the South began to crumble” (Colaiaco 1). In 1964, the Civil Rights Act came into fruition and outlawed segregation. Then, in 1965, the Voting Rights Act outlawed discrimination in voting. We can only imagine the smile that would have spread across King’s face after Barack Obama was elected President of the United States of America this year, and we can only guess at King’s satisfaction of seeing the diversity of the candidates running for the 2008 election. Times have changed and conditions have improved from the effort of people, such as Martin Luther King Jr. However, in King’s attempt at creating unity among people, many of the human rights violations not in the public spotlight were forgotten and many of the struggles of people in poor

neighborhoods were ignored. Many of these problems persist today.

As Socrates would argue, society is always in need of the “gadfly,” or dissenter, but prophets are much more than dissenters; they speak up against injustice and serve as messengers of morality for the people (*The Apology*). Through the efforts of prophets, great changes are made. Evil can be converted to Good, immorality can be changed to morality, and injustice can be restored to justice. Martin Luther King Jr. emerged in a time of racial injustice and applied the same practices of Hosea, Jonah, and Amos from thousands of years ago. Martin Luther King Jr. helped end segregation in the United States, but he was not the only one. Thousands of other civil and human rights activists did their part too. Society needs prophets to expose the injustices of society, but prophets would not be successful, unless they received the support of their peers.

Today, we are closer than we were before to guaranteeing universal human rights; however, more work must be done. For example, why did the Apartheid segregation in South Africa endure into the early 1990s? In the United States, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) outlawed segregation, but segregation in America’s education systems still exists today, as Jonathan Kozol argues in his book, *The Shame of the Nation*. This is something that King did not get a chance to combat, and it is something that another modern prophet, Jonathan Kozol, brings to our attention. Perhaps, society will always need prophets to speak up for the oppressed. Who will be the Hoseas, Jonahs, Gandhis, and Kings of the future? Whoever they may be, tomorrow will shine with their help.

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