Beacon Light and Penumbra

African American Gospel Lyrics and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream"

KEITH D. MILLER

Before James Farmer founded the Congress of Racial Equality and led the Freedom Rides, he earned a master's degree in religion at Howard University. There he studied with Benjamin Mays and Howard Thurman, who later served as two of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s most important mentors. Like Mays and Thurman, Farmer's father was an ordained minister. The senior Farmer had completed a Ph.D. in religion at Boston University, where, years later, King also graduated with a Ph.D. in religion.

Yet, when James Farmer graduated from Howard, despite his rich religious background and training, he declined to be ordained as a minister. When I asked Farmer why he refused ordination, he explained that he did not think that the African American church would ever contribute significantly to the struggle for racial equality. He admitted that his analysis proved incorrect.¹

How did certain African American churches—which Farmer and others considered extremely otherworldly and apolitical—become a potent political force during the 1950s and 1960s? Scholars have not seriously addressed this question.

Here's a preamble to another question. King's "I Have a Dream" is easily the most popular speech included in anthologies used in freshman and sophomore English courses in colleges and universities. In fact, King's famous oration is often the only example of public address included in such collections. Imagine. In their college English courses, many students encounter no speeches by Malcolm X or John Kennedy or Barbara Jordan. They read no orations by George Washington or Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln or Sojourner Truth or Franklin Roosevelt or Clarence Darrow or Cesar Chavez. None by Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Helen Keller or Margaret Sanger or Mary McLeod Bethune or Chief Joseph. None by any other American. And not only that. They also read no addresses by Winston Churchill or Queen Elizabeth I or Cicero or Pericles or any

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other European, ancient or modern. And no speeches from Africa, China, India, or South America. Instead, many anthologies represent the entire panorama of oratory through a single speech—"I Have a Dream."

While English professors grade students' writing, they invariably correct students' clichés, prodding them to coin original expressions instead of mindlessly repeating shopworn phrases.

But—here comes the question—if "I Have a Dream" can exemplify the total, historical cavalcade of speeches, why does "I Have a Dream" feature so many clichés? And feature them it does. During the twentieth century, anyone who attended almost any Sunday worship service in any African American Baptist church almost certainly heard about "trials and tribulations." No set of words is more routine among black Protestants. Why does King insert "trials and tribulations" into "I Have a Dream"? Why does he also employ such utterly familiar expressions as "beacon light of hope," "joyous daybreak," "dark and desolate valley," "sunlit path," and "valley of despair" to mention a few? Why would any gifted orator sprinkle such triteness into his most acclaimed speech? And by what magic would the clichés appear not to harm King's eloquence, but somehow to enhance it? While students often raise such questions about "I Have a Dream," no one has tried to answer them in print.

In this essay I explain how, in "I Have a Dream," King transmutes traditional African American Protestant language for political ends. I do so by making two new claims. First, a single system of metaphors underlies a large number of African American spiritual and gospel lyrics. Second, this system of metaphors structures much of "I Have a Dream" and largely accounts for King's majestic clichés. Understanding these previously unexamined metaphors is crucial to understanding "I Have a Dream."

I build my argument in four steps. First, adapting the metaphor theory of George Lakoff and his co-authors, I identify the network of metaphors in African American spiritual and gospel lyrics. Second, I examine the value and function of the metaphors for churchgoers. Third, I analyze King's use of the metaphors prior to "I Have a Dream." Fourth, I explore the value and function of the tropes in "I Have a Dream."

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain that systems of metaphors structure everyday speech, often reinforcing each other. Such metaphors include LIGHT/DARK and UP/DOWN, LIGHT signifying good and DARK indicating evil, UP representing good and DOWN designating evil.²
Metaphors of LIGHT/DARK and UP/DOWN also appear frequently in the Bible and in Christian discourse, including, for example, John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Frederick Douglass’s speeches, and many Christian hymns. In these texts, LIGHT and UP spell holiness, revelation, joy, freedom, Jesus, or God; DARK and DOWN indicate suffering, sin, oppression, slavery, or evil.

Lakoff and Mark Turner note another common metaphor: LIFE IS A JOURNEY. This trope underlies much of the Bible and world literature, including the Book of Exodus, Homer’s *Odyssey*, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, and African American slave narratives. Christians modify LIFE IS A JOURNEY to LIFE IS A JOURNEY MADE EASIER BY GOD AND JESUS. Reflecting on their hardscrabble lives, African Americans adjust this standard Christian figure to LIFE IS AN EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT JOURNEY MADE EASIER BY GOD AND JESUS.

Lakoff and Turner claim that LIFE IS A JOURNEY precedes another metaphor: DEATH IS GOING TO A FINAL DESTINATION. Christians alter this trope to FOR THE FAITHFUL, DEATH IS ARRIVAL AND FULFILLMENT IN HEAVEN. Black lyricists embrace this metaphor and add another: HEAVEN IS HOME.

Lyricists, especially Baptists, have extended workaday and Biblical metaphors into a system that expresses orthodox Christianity and African American experience. This system embodies what Lakoff and Turner call “poetic thought” that “uses the mechanisms” of common tropes but “extends” them, “elaborates them, and combines them in ways that go beyond the ordinary.” By extending metaphors of LIGHT/DARK and UP/DOWN, African American religious lyricists together weave a system of “poetic thought.”

This system features the following metaphors:

I. LIGHT/DARK

Examples of LIGHT:
- DAWN, DAYBREAK, NOON, DAY, BEAMS, STAR, SUN,
- SUNSHINE, RAYS, BRIGHTNESS

Examples of DARK:
- GLOOM, NIGHT, OR MIDNIGHT

Elaboration:
- STORM
II. UP/DOWN
Examples of UP:
HIGH, HIGHER, STAND, RISE, CLIMB, LIFT, STAR, SUN, SUNSHINE
Examples of DOWN:
LOW, LOWER, FALL, STUMBLE, SLIP, SINK
Elaboration:
HILLS, MOUNTAINS, VALLEYS, HEAVEN (above the sky)

III. LIFE IS AN EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT JOURNEY MADE EASIER BY GOD OR JESUS
Elaboration:
DAUNTING OBSTACLES:
STORMS, MOUNTAINS, TRIALS, TRIBULATIONS
JESUS HELPS BELIEVERS OVERCOME DAUNTING OBSTACLES
BELIEVERS CARRY A HEAVY LOAD OR BURDEN
JESUS RELIEVES THE LOAD OR BURDEN

IV. FOR THE FAITHFUL, DEATH IS ARRIVAL AND FULFILLMENT IN HEAVEN
Elaboration:
HEAVEN IS HOME®

According to these metaphors, everyone undertakes a spiritual JOURNEY: sinners move LOW, STUMBLING or FALLING; faithful Christians withstand STORMS, TRIALS, and TRIBULATIONS before advancing UP and into the LIGHT, LIFTED and saved by Jesus.

These tropes customarily interlock. In these lyrics, SUN and STARS are HIGH, close to heaven and holy. For that reason, SUN and STARS merge metaphors of LIGHT/DARK with those of UP/DOWN. Because storms are literally dark, STORM embodies and elaborates LIGHT/DARK, thereby fusing LIFE IS A DIFFICULT JOURNEY with LIGHT/DARK. MOUNTAINS impose obstacles on the JOURNEY. But, because MOUNTAINS are close to the SUN and heaven, they also serve as sites of holiness, revelation, and joy. MOUNTAINS thus fuse metaphors of UP/DOWN with those of LIGHT/DARK.

These metaphors enliven spirituals sung by slaves. For example, one spiritual urges believers to “steal away home” to heaven. In the most popular of all spirituals, the narrator longs for a “chariot” to “swing low” and “carry” her “home” to heaven. “Steal Away” and “Swing Low, Sweet
Chariot” blend LIFE IS A JOURNEY, DEATH IS FULFILLMENT IN HEAVEN, and HEAVEN IS HOME; “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” merges those three metaphors with UP/DOWN. In another well-known spiritual, the narrator plaintively laments, “Been in the storm so long.” But, she adds, “If ever I get on the mountaintop . . . I’ll shout and shout and never stop.” Because mountains are closer to heaven, ascending the MOUNTAIN means triumphing over the STORM and attaining holiness.

In a gospel lyric by Lucie Campbell, a dominant musical presence at the National Baptist Convention, the narrator experiences “trials” and is “burdened” until “heavenly sunshine” penetrates the “shadows” and “rain” when she hears Jesus say, “‘Do not falter’” and “‘Follow me.’” In this lyric, Campbell brilliantly combines LIFE IS A DIFFICULT JOURNEY, FILLED WITH TRIALS, BUT MADE EASIER BY JESUS; UP/DOWN (sunshine, falter); LIGHT/DARK (sunshine, shadows); STORM (rain); and CARRY A BURDEN (“burdened”).

In the best loved of all gospel songs, “Precious Lord,” Thomas Dorsey’s narrator petitions Jesus to “Take my hand. . . . Let me stand. . . . /Lead me on through the night, through the storm, to the light.” The narrator then asks Jesus to help him reach “home” or heaven. These lines imaginatively and seamlessly fuse LIFE IS A DIFFICULT JOURNEY MADE EASIER BY JESUS (lead me on), UP/DOWN (stand), LIGHT/DARK (light, night), STORM, and HEAVEN IS HOME.

In William Herbert Brewster’s “I’m Climbing Higher and Higher,” the narrator is “sinking in sin” and suffers “great tribulation” until “a ladder” descends “from heaven” and she begins “climbing” in search of “higher ground.” She plans to “pass the sun moon and stars” and planets. These lyrics intertwine and elaborate LIFE IS A DIFFICULT JOURNEY, FILLED WITH TRIBULATION, BUT MADE EASIER BY JESUS; LIGHT/DARK and UP/DOWN. Brewster’s lines also associate “sun” with “heaven.”

Some gospel lyrics only include one or two of these metaphors. But, for veteran churchgoers accustomed to this system of interlocking figures, a single metaphor entails the entire system.

These mutually reinforcing tropes appear in many, many prayers, hymns, and sermons in African American Protestant services, especially among Baptists. Indeed, the metaphor system is so pervasive and so formidable that it seems virtually inseparable from the Black Baptist experience itself. Because the tropes overlap and intertwine, someone who
wanted to challenge any one of them would need to challenge all of them. One could hardly do so without seeming to advocate atheism—an extremely unpopular position in the highly churched African American community.

The metaphor system affords four enormous advantages. First, the tropes are extremely clear and accessible. Second, they provide hope. Amid the inconceivable barbarism of slavery and the mental (and sometimes physical) torture of segregation, the metaphors affirm that a loving God governs a highly ordered, reliable cosmos and cares for the oppressed. Third, the ubiquity of the metaphors contributes to African American solidarity with those living throughout the nation and with many generations of the dead and unborn. All are included—a vast African American society. Fourth, the tropes proclaim that, far from being isolated, lost, or worthless, each individual life embodies ultimate meaning.

Martin Luther King, Jr.’s father, a folk preacher, and his mother, who played the organ each Sunday, ensured that King, Jr. would attend church every week of his childhood and adolescence. There he was soaked in spiritual and gospel music and lyrics, including those by Campbell, Dorsey, and Brewster—titans of gospel music whose lines were often sung in Baptist churches and at the annual National Baptist Convention, which the King family attended.

King, Jr. sometimes harnesses the metaphors to articulate basic Protestant theology about the struggle of the individual who, by relying on God, can resist sin and experience salvation. For example, in one sermon, King incorporates lyrics from the gospel song “Never Alone,” merging his voice with that of the narrator. He declares that he observed the “lightning flash” and the “thunder roll,” that he experienced “sinbreakers dashing” that aimed “to conquer” his “soul.” Then, he states, Jesus urged him to resist the STORM—a typical image in gospel lyrics. In this passage King refers only to his individual religious experience, not to African Americans’ political struggle.10

Like Campbell, Dorsey, Brewster, and other spiritual and gospel lyricists, King interlaces the metaphors. For example, by explaining that God enables people to “rise from the midnight of desperation to the daybreak of joy,” he fuses metaphors of UP/DOWN, LIGHT/DARK and LIFE IS A DIFFICULT JOURNEY.11 He also criticizes humanism as an attempt to “live without a sky,” rhapsodizes about “beautiful stars” that “bedeck the heavens like swinging lanterns of eternity,” and implores listeners to
reject humanism and “reach up and discover God.” Again, this passage blends UP/DOWN and LIGHT/DARK. Here, like Brewster, King identifies “sky” and “stars” with “God” and “eternity.” In these statements King orchestrates the metaphors to proclaim God’s ability to redeem individual humans, who are prone to excessive pride and sin. Implicit in King’s declaration is the promise of heaven to all who live faithfully. These passages also fail to mention black political struggle.

Generally, however, King secularizes the metaphors. But never completely. In order to understand this process, consider the gospel song, “Woke Up This Morning with My Mind Stayed on Jesus.” When civil rights leaders sang the lyrics and tune of this song, they retained the tune and only changed one word: “Woke Up This Morning with My Mind Stayed on Freedom.” In this alteration, when singers substitute the word “Freedom” for “Jesus,” people who know the song can still “hear” the word “Jesus” even though they no longer literally hear it. Though absent, “Jesus” remains present. I call this effect a penumbra. Although “Freedom” eclipses “Jesus,” the sacredness of “Jesus” continues to surround “Freedom,” which gains a penumbra of holiness when it substitutes for “Jesus,” which—for most African Americans—is indisputably an ultimate term.

When King secularizes the spiritual and gospel metaphors, he creates a similar effect. He notes that Jews have been forced to walk through the dark night of oppression. . . . But this did not keep them from rising up with creative genius to plunge against cloud-filled nights of affliction new and blazing stars of inspiration.

To his list of Jewish achievers, he adds exemplary African Americans: “. . . Booker T. Washington rose to the stature of one of America’s greatest leaders; he list a torch and darkness fled.” King applauds gifted singers Roland Hayes and Marian Anderson, who also “rose.” He relates that Mary McCloud Bethune, Ralph Bunche, Joe Louis, Jesse Owens, and Jackie Robinson each “grabbed” a “star.” Like a gospel lyricist, King here blends LIFE IS A JOURNEY, UP/DOWN, and LIGHT/DARK, elaborating the metaphors through lyricists’ typical references to NIGHT and STARS.

While these metaphors normally articulate standard Christian theology, King uses them here to evoke not God, but the earthly accomplishments of notable Jews and Blacks. But he does not altogether secularize the met-
aphors. Because they are used so pervasively in a sacred context and because King is a highly regarded minister, a penumbra of sanctity clings to each trope.

As a civil rights orator, King wields the entire system of metaphors. During the first rally of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, he bemoans African Americans' "long night of captivity" and longs for a "daybreak of freedom"—a double metaphor that resurfaces in "I Have a Dream." Like gospel lyricists, he consistently reprises such phrases as "dark days," "dark skies," "ray of hope," "daybreak," and "new dawn." He often urges listeners to "rise" or "stand up" for their rights.

Why does King choreograph these figures? Doing so affirms the unity of the sacred and secular. He constantly rails at any version of Christianity that focuses on heavenly bliss while ignoring earthly injustice. By choosing the same network of religious metaphors to represent Christian redemption and earthly achievements, he pictures goodness on earth and goodness in heaven as essentially identical.

This rhetorical practice is not unusual among African Americans. Spirituals, for example, express the simultaneous desire to escape from slavery and to reach heaven. Also, black women's groups have sometimes used the motto "Lifting as We Climb" to explain their simultaneous dedication to altruism and personal achievement. Their slogan combines UP/DOWN with LIFE IS AN EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT JOURNEY. In Langston Hughes's renowned poem, "Mother to Son," a mother informs her child about her travails. No one offers her a "crystal stair"; instead, she struggles arduously up rough wooden steps, pierced by splinters. Both the women's phrase and Hughes's verse are secular; for many African Americans, however, their metaphors resonate with those of spiritual and gospel lyrics.

In "I Have a Dream" King seizes and politicizes this entire ensemble of metaphors, including its clichés. Note the following tropes in "I Have a Dream":

UP:
high plane of dignity
rise from the dark and desolate valley
majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force
From every mountainside, let freedom ring.
Let freedom ring from
the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire
the mighty mountains of New York
the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania
the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado
the curvaceous slopes of California
Stone Mountain of Georgia
Lookout Mountain of Tennessee
every hill and molehill in Mississippi

DOWN:
Let justice roll down like waters.
dark and desolate valley of segregation
quicksand of injustice
valley of despair
down in Alabama

LIGHT:
great beacon light of hope
joyous daybreak
sunlit path of racial justice
bright day of justice

DARK:
long night of captivity
dark and desolate valley of segregation

LIFE IS AN EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT JOURNEY:
rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation
trials and tribulations
wallow in the valley of despair
Our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the
motel of the highways and the hotels of the cities.
battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of
police brutality
mountain of despair

In “I Have a Dream” King pleads for America to “rise from the dark
and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice.” In
this sentence he fuses LIFE IS A DIFFICULT JOURNEY, UP/DOWN
(rise), and LIGHT/DARK.
“I Have a Dream” secularizes gospel lyricists’ LIFE IS A DIFFICULT JOURNEY and STORM by describing the experiences of civil rights agitators who are “battled by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality.” King secularizes LIFE IS A DIFFICULT JOURNEY and CARRY A BURDEN by explaining that African Americans’ “bodies heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities.” Because demonstrators’ JOURNEY is EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT and replete with “excessive trials and tribulations,” he urges them not to “wallow in the valley of despair,” which resembles the low places evoked in gospel lyrics and the “valley of the shadow of death” walked by the narrator of the Twenty-third Psalm. He also politicizes the metaphor of MOUNTAIN as obstacle by proclaiming the ability of protestors with “faith” to “hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.”

King’s quotation from the Book of Amos—“Let justice roll down like waters...”—is an UP/DOWN metaphor but also an image of transformation in which God dispatches justice in heaven down to earth. This citation uses the Bible to argue that the sacred and the secular are inseparable.

Throughout “I Have a Dream” King’s status as a minister, his overt Biblical citations, and his use of the anaphoras and the delivery of the folk pulp—it—starting calm and rocking almost imperceptibly to a momentous climax—help contribute a godly penumbra to each secularized metaphor. For African American Protestants, religious meaning suffuses all of these metaphors. No matter how secularized the figures might seem, the penumbra of the holy persists.

The entire pattern of metaphors prepares listeners for King’s conclusion, the litany of “Let Freedom Ring,” which King borrows and adapts from Rev. Archibald Carey. King introduces the litany by quoting lyrics from “America” that compare “freedom” to a bell that can “ring” “from every mountainside.” Then, following Carey, King extends the lyrics of “America” by enumerating mountains from which, he hopes, freedom, will eventually ring:

Let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire!
Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York!
Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies from Pennsylvania!
Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado!
Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California!
But not only that.
Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia!
Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee!
Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill in Mississippi!

By the time he finishes, “every mountainside” is included as a site for freedom to “ring.”

Earlier in the speech, King climaxes his famous “I Have a Dream” litany by incorporating a prophecy from Isaiah:

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, the hills and mountains shall be laid low, the rough places shall be made plain, the crooked places shall be made straight, the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

In this passage, King yearns for the day when God will transform the pain of racism, smoothing and straightening all obstacles—valleys, mountains, rough places, and crooked places—that interfere with racial justice.

In his conclusion, King essentially repeats the prophecy. “The valley of despair” will become “the mountain of despair,” and activists working with God will ensure that mountains ring with freedom. Freedom will even peal “from Stone Mountain of Georgia”—an infamous meeting place for the Ku Klux Klan—and “from every hill and molehill in Mississippi,” a flat state dominated by white supremacy.

King’s conclusion also secularizes the metaphors of spiritual and gospel lyrics, metaphors that are especially prominent in “I’m Climbing Up the Rough Side of the Mountain” by Thomas Dorsey, “When I Get Home” by Lucie Campbell, and “Heaven Bells” by Kenneth Morris, another well-known gospel composer.

In “I’m Climbing Up the Rough Side of the Mountain,” Dorsey’s narrator scales a decidedly “rough” MOUNTAIN that poses huge difficulties but is also HIGH and blessed. The narrator struggles to tackle the MOUNTAIN because conquering it means reaching heaven. King’s metaphors parallel those of Dorsey’s lyric. Shortly before King reaches the “Let freedom ring” litany, he mentions a giant obstacle—“the mountain of despair.” But when, soon afterward, King articulates his “Let freedom ring” anaphoras, “every mountainside” rings with freedom. Thus, at the end of “I Have a Dream,” as in Dorsey’s lyric, cloud-piercing MOUNTAINS supply the most awesome challenge, but also the greatest imagin-
able possibility—heaven for Dorsey’s narrator, freedom for those listening to King.

In “When I Get Home,” Campbell’s narrator celebrates the long-anticipated day when she will “get home” to heaven. When that happens, “the bells will be ringing” and “the saints will be singing.” Likewise, in Morris’s lyric, the narrator hears “heaven bells” and knows that she soon will die and enter the next life. Campbell and Morris thus associate ringing bells with the ultimate experience—life in heaven.

King’s ministerial status, Biblical citations, anaphoras, delivery, and network of religious metaphors add a penumbra to his concluding imagery. For many of King’s African American listeners who sang Campbell’s and Morris’s lyrics, bells ring in heaven. Thus, King’s “freedom” that “rings” from mountains carries the penumbra of the holy because King overtly associates “freedom” with mountains and implicitly, but strongly, associates “freedom” with “heaven.”

In spiritual and gospel lyrics LIFE IS AN EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT JOURNEY MADE EASIER BY GOD OR JESUS.

The arduous JOURNEY often involves TRIALS and TRIBULATIONS.
The arduous JOURNEY often involves CARRYING A BURDEN.
The arduous JOURNEY often demands that one endure and surmount STORMS.

If successful on the JOURNEY, one moves from DOWN to UP and from DARKNESS to LIGHT.

When one overcomes all difficulties, the JOURNEY leads to heaven, which is UP and filled with LIGHT.

MOUNTAINS interfere with the spiritual progress of the JOURNEY.
But, because MOUNTAINS are HIGH, they can enable one to reach the ultimate destination of the JOURNEY—heaven.

BELLS can RING to celebrate one’s arrival in heaven where people sometimes sing.

In “I Have a Dream” LIFE IS AN EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT JOURNEY MADE EASIER BY GOD.

For African Americans, the JOURNEY still begins in slavery. (“One hundred years [after Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation] the Negro still is not free; one hundred years later, the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation”).

The arduous JOURNEY involves TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS (“some of you have come here out of excessive trials and tribulations”).
The arduous JOURNEY involves CARRYING A BURDEN (“our bod-
ies, heavy with the fatigue of travel cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities”).

The arduous JOURNEY demands that one endure and surmount STORMS (“Some of you . . . [have been] battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality”).

If successful on the JOURNEY, one moves from DOWN to UP and from DARKNESS to LIGHT (“rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice”).

When one overcomes all difficulties, the JOURNEY leads to freedom, which is UP on a MOUNTAIN (“Let freedom ring from every mountainside”).

Freedom and justice are filled with LIGHT (“[The Emancipation Proclamation] came as a great beacon light of hope,” “the bright day of justice”). MOUNTAINS interfere with the spiritual progress of the JOURNEY (“mountains will be laid low [by God],” “mountain of despair”).

But, because MOUNTAINS are HIGH, they can enable one to achieve the ultimate reward of the JOURNEY—freedom (“Let freedom ring from every mountainside”).

FREEDOM IS A BELL that will RING on MOUNTAINS when African Americans achieve racial equality.

Fittingly, in the final sentences of “I Have a Dream,” when “freedom rings,” all Americans—“black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants”—will “join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, ‘Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, we’re free at last.’” After a long journey negotiating the valleys and mountains of injustice, King predicts, African Americans—and all Americans—will finally experience freedom. And they will sing—something people often do in heaven.

In composing “I Have a Dream,” King marries the structure and content of the African American political jeremiad to an ensemble of metaphors from spiritual and gospel lyrics, metaphors that he partly but not entirely secularizes. Knowing little or nothing about this jeremiad tradition and these metaphorical lyrics, many people wrongly assume that “I Have a Dream” is a highly original speech.

But, for King and other African American Protestants, this jeremiad and these metaphors were decidedly familiar. Fusing the two rhetorical systems enabled King to generate the wonder and majesty of “I Have a Dream” and thereby both to sanctify and to politicize the African American struggle.