

REMEMBERING ROSA PARKS: RECOGNIZING A CONTEMPORARY PROPHETIC ACT

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[As the United States prepares to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the 1955 act of civil disobedience by Rosa Parks, it is critical that any false emphases and flawed cultural myths associated with that December day be challenged and corrected. By exploring some of the historical-political, social, and personal influences that encouraged Parks's refusal to move from her bus seat, it is possible to recognize in her deed the markings of a true prophetic act.]

OVER THE YEARS, the historic event associated with Rosa Parks has been characterized in the following way: On December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, a good-hearted, non-political, middle-aged seamstress was so tired from work that she refused to give up her seat on the bus ride home, indirectly setting in motion the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.¹ This version honors various admirable qualities found in Parks's story, namely, her womanhood, her work ethic, and her physical tiredness after a hard day's work. Unfortunately, it sidesteps the fundamental issue of racial injustice in favor of focusing on the contrast between a tired woman and a belligerent bus driver. It also ignores the mountain of evidence that insists Rosa Parks should never be characterized simply as a good-hearted seamstress.

As the United States prepares to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Rosa Parks's act of civil disobedience, it is critical that the flawed cultural myths associated with that December day be challenged and corrected. What happened on that bus was far from haphazard or coincidental. By examining some of the factors that influenced Parks's refusal to give up her bus seat, it is possible to recognize the markings of a contemporary prophetic act.

To assist in this process, two precedents, one scriptural and one historical, will be briefly considered. First, the Hebrew Scriptures contain the

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¹ Douglas Brinkley, *Rosa Parks* (New York: Viking, 2000) 159, 226–27.

account of Jeremiah's purchase of the field in Anathoth (Jeremiah 32:1–15). This act was basically an event in the form of a simile, for it suggested that just as the Anathoth field was sold to Jeremiah, other plots of land near Jerusalem would also be bought and sold in the future. Jeremiah's deed was not a miniature of a larger event, like the smashing of the potter's vessel (Jeremiah 19:1–13) that symbolized a coming destruction on a much larger scale. Rather it is the first purchase in what would be a long series of purchases occurring during an anticipated period of future restoration.²

Second, this incident involved the attribution of prophetic qualities to a type of action that might otherwise be considered quite ordinary. In normal times, buying a field of land was a commonplace occurrence. But, by buying a field already under the control of the invading Babylonian army, Jeremiah risked marking himself as a traitor. Only persons expecting to be able to retain ownership of their property under the conquering regime would have reasonably considered purchasing land at that time. Jeremiah, however, designated this act as symbolic of a promise made by the God of Israel that normal life would one day resume in the land.³ Through this deliberate act, Jeremiah proclaimed a prophetic message of hope that would sustain the people during the Babylonian exile.

The historical precedent that now will be considered comes from an event that occurred 25 years prior to Parks's act of civil disobedience, namely, the 1930 Salt March of Mahatma Gandhi. On March 12, 1930, Gandhi and 78 followers departed from his ashram outside Ahmedabad, intending to march 240 miles to the coastal city of Dandi. There Gandhi would lead the group in picking up natural sea salt, thus defying the oppressive Salt Laws and provoking a campaign of mass civil disobedience. Gandhi targeted these laws for three main reasons: they taxed the principal condiment of the poor; they forbade the local manufacture of a bountiful natural resource; and they fostered an unnecessary dependence on imported British goods.⁴ The procession reached the sea on the evening of April 5, but it was decided not to perform any acts of civil disobedience until the next day. Early on April 6, Gandhi picked up some rough sea salt and reportedly said, "With this, I am shaking the foundations of the British Empire."⁵ Almost immediately, thousands became involved in acts of civil

² W. David Stacey, *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament* (London: Epworth, 1990) 159; Kelvin Friebe, *Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's Sign-Acts* (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 1999) 320–21.

³ John Bright, *Jeremiah*, Anchor Bible 21 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965) 130.

⁴ Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi and Civil Disobedience: The Mahatma in Indian Politics 1928–34* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1977) 99–101.

⁵ Dennis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action* (New York: Columbia University, 1993) 115.

disobedience. By the end of the year, over 60,000 people were imprisoned for acts as seemingly minor as what Gandhi had done on the beach of Dandi. The impact of Gandhi's prophetic act on both Indian and American history provides an excellent point of reference as we now return to Rosa Parks's act of civil disobedience.

A key 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.⁶

In contrast to any simplistic interpretation of Rosa Parks's refusal to move, at least 18 different motivating factors can be given that played a part in the events of that day. They will now be briefly described under the categories of historical-political, social, and personal influences.

HISTORICAL-POLITICAL INFLUENCES

An initial historical influence on Rosa Parks's 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 (handed down on May 17, 1954) rejected the long-held belief that "separate-but-equal" educational programs were constitutional. 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 15 months later, when an all-White jury acquitted two men accused of the brutal murder of Emmett Till. On August 13, 1955, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old youth from Chicago, was dared to say "Bye, baby" to a White shopkeeper in Money, Mississippi. He was later brutally murdered reportedly by the woman's husband and a brother-in-law. Till's mother demanded an open casket funeral in Chicago, which not only led to photographs of Till's mangled body being printed in the media but also brought national and international criticism of Mississippi's segregationist society. Rosa Parks was well aware of the details of this brutal event.

⁶ Rosa Parks with Gregory J. Reed, *Dear Mrs. Parks: A Dialogue with Today's Youth* (New York: Lee & Low Books, 1996) 40-41.

Another influence involves the activity of the Women's Political Council (WPC) of Montgomery. At first glance, this seems to have been only 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 in relation to the bus system. They had been entertaining the idea of a bus boycott for years and, under the leadership of Jo Ann Robinson, had begun shaping concrete plans a few months before the Parks's incident. Given such mutual interests of Rosa Parks and the WPC, it would seem likely that Parks was aware of, and at least indirectly influenced by, some of the work of Jo Ann Robinson's group.

A fourth historical influence is connected with the stories of the two other African American women who, in the months prior to Rosa Parks's incident, were arrested for failing to move from their seats when ordered to do so by White bus drivers. On March 2, 1955, a 15-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 Colvin arrested and forcibly taken away in a patrol car. 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.

The second case involved an 18-year-old girl named Louise Smith, who was also arrested for failing to vacate her bus seat. She was seated in the non-reserved section, but was fined for not obeying the bus driver's request that she move farther back in the bus. For the Montgomery branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), these incidents proved to be "trial runs" for envisioning how orchestrated efforts might succeed in removing the unjust laws of segregation.⁷

Many have wondered whether Rosa Parks was prompted by the NAACP local leadership to initiate action against the bus company. It is clear from Parks's 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.⁸

It must be conceded, though, that Parks's position as the secretary of the Montgomery branch of the NAACP and her friendship with chapter Presi-

⁷ For both these cases, see Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1987) 38–43; and Brinkley, *Rosa Parks* 87–90, 103–4.

⁸ Rosa Parks (with Jim Haskins), *Rosa Parks: My Story* (New York: Dial, 1992) 116.

dent E. D. Nixon significantly influenced her. 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. Thus, 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.

A final historical-political influence to be mentioned here is the crucial impact of Parks's 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 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.⁹

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. 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 returned back home to her job and daily life in segregated Montgomery.

SOCIAL AND FAMILY INFLUENCES

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 worth mentioning was Rosa Parks's friendship with Virginia Durr, a committed activist for civil rights. A mutual friend introduced Rosa Parks to Durr, who soon discovered that Parks was an excellent seamstress and hired her to do alterations on family dresses. Soon the two women spent much time together. According to Parks's biography, Virginia Durr was a mentor to her and one of the closest female friends she had in Montgomery.¹⁰

A second social influence on Rosa Parks was her inspirational encounter in 1955 with Septima Clark, who worked with Myles Horton as director of

⁹ The sponsor was Aubrey Williams, editor of the *Southern Farmer* magazine. Brinkley, *Rosa Parks* 90–95.

¹⁰ Brinkley, *Rosa Parks* 85, 86.

the workshops at the Highlander Folk School. Clark was a born activist and strong proponent of integration across American society. The Highlander experience of interracial camaraderie coupled with learning from women of conviction such as Septima Clark had a definite impact on Rosa Parks's 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. Parks had known Nixon since 1943, working closely with him as secretary of the local NAACP chapter and advisor for the NAACP Youth Council.¹¹ She even followed him as his executive secretary when he was elected president of the Progressive Democratic Association of Montgomery; and, as was her wish, she worked for Nixon without compensation.

In suggesting a fourth influence on Rosa Parks's life, the focus now shifts from colleagues to members of her immediate family, beginning with her brother, Sylvester. When Sylvester returned from military service in World War II, the hypocrisy and prejudice prevalent in their home community was hard for both siblings to bear. Black soldiers, who had fought bravely in defense of the United States, often returned home to a nation that considered them "uppity" and "troublemakers" if they wore their uniforms in public. Uncomfortable with such prejudicial treatment, in late 1945 Sylvester packed up his wife and two children and moved to Detroit, where he took a job at a Chrysler factory. The yoke of segregation thus caused some of Parks's 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. 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." She also mentions how her Grandma Rose was an example of care and love while still being strong-willed and a strict disciplinarian.¹² But then she moves on to the figure of her grandfather, Sylvester Edwards, who was someone that Rosa Parks consistently describes as an influential figure in her life. Born a slave, Sylvester Edwards was light-skinned and dared to break the social taboos of the day by 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. He was adamant that his children or grand-

¹¹ Parks, *My Story* 73, 94; Brinkley, *Rosa Parks* 51–54, 70.

¹² 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, 1994) 47–48.

children never work as domestic servants in White households. Parks makes these telling remarks: "His memory will always 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."¹³

A final family influence to be mentioned here was that of Rosa Parks's 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, even though to do so was to risk being beaten or killed. In the years prior to December 1955, Raymond's commitment to civil rights and his active involvement in the NAACP were probably the dominant forces in Rosa Parks's 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."¹⁴

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND CHARACTER TRAITS

One difference between descriptions of prophetic activity from biblical eras and 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. But since Rosa Parks has been asked so often to explain why she did what she did, her responses, plus comments made by her friends and associates, provide excellent source material for recognizing a number of personal factors that can be said to have influenced Parks's 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. If physical fatigue was a factor in Parks's 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 Youth Council meeting. 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 had experienced between different bus systems in her own community. In 1941, Parks got a

¹³ Parks, *Quiet Strength* 49. see also Parks, *Dear Mrs. Parks* 41.

¹⁴ Parks, *My Story* 59.

job at Maxwell Field, a nearby Army Air Corps base. On the U.S. military base, 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 felt 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.”¹⁵

A third personal influence is a quality of Rosa Parks that is frequently mentioned by those who know her well, that is, a steely inner strength. Her long-time associate, Elaine Steele, has remarked that Parks is a person who 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 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.¹⁶

Along with Parks’s 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, Parks disputes this detail in her autobiography. 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.¹⁷

While learning about self-pride from her mother and grandparents, Parks also gives credit to Miss Alice Winter, one of her early schoolteachers. 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.¹⁸

As a corollary to 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 who confronted her on December 1, 1955. She did not know Blake personally; she did not even learn his name until her subsequent trial. But they had already had an unfortunate encounter 12

¹⁵ Brinkley, *Rosa Parks* 43.

¹⁶ Roxanne Brown, “Mother of the Movement: Nation Honors Rosa Parks with Birthday Observance,” *Ebony* 43 (February 1988) 68–72, at 72.

¹⁷ Brinkley, *Rosa Parks* 93; citing Virginia Durr’s text *Outside the Magic Circle* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1985).

¹⁸ Parks, *My Story* 49.

years prior.¹⁹ 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 reboarding 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 reboard 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 in the back of the bus and place in the rear stairwell and aisle were already full. 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 precipitator of the famous incident of 1955 was only possible because Parks had neglected to notice who was driving the bus when it stopped to pick up passengers near her place of work. 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 personal influence affecting Rosa Parks’s decision not to move from her bus seat was her deeply rooted Christian faith. Invariably, when Parks is asked about the events that day, she uses language that is faith-based and confessional in nature. When 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:

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.²⁰

¹⁹ Brinkley, *Rosa Parks* 57–60; Parks, *My Story* 77–79.

²⁰ Parks, *Dear Mrs. Parks* 42.

According to her biographer, Douglas Brinkley, “faith in God was never the question for Rosa Parks; it was the answer.”²¹

In summary, what is the significance of this survey of possible influences shaping Rosa Parks’s decision not to surrender her bus seat? Consider the fact that when material from the Hebrew Scripture is studied in a historical-critical manner, a key step in the exegetical process has occurred even before one begins. This is because all descriptions of biblical prophetic activity come to us in a redacted form. The material has been edited and shaped according to implicit criteria, such as the goal of authenticating Jeremiah as a true prophetic figure and presenting his messages as being valid expressions of the word and will of God for the Judahite community.

This is quite different from considerations of modern prophetic acts. While redaction of contemporary historical events can and does occur, exegetes of such events are also active participants in determining the events’ overall significance. They seek out first-person accounts, read biographical material, interview witnesses, and reach conclusions based on varying degrees of critical research. Moreover, the question of “Why did she or he do that?” is always asked of 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 specific prophetic acts performed by modern figures. Far from secularizing or demythologizing examples of contemporary prophetism, such in-depth, historical-critical, psychological, and sociological examination helps in rendering judgment as to their authenticity and efficacy, while possibly shedding light on what may have been involved in similar prophetic examples from the Hebrew Scripture.

RECOGNIZING THE PROPHETIC QUALITY OF ROSA PARKS’S ACT

In order to offer a provisional evaluation of whether Rosa Parks’s act of civil disobedience should be considered a modern prophetic act, the earlier biblical and historical precedents will now be revisited. In recalling the prophet Jeremiah’s decision to purchase the field in Anathoth, it was mentioned that 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 invading army conquered Jerusalem. As such, Jeremiah’s prophetic act was done at great personal risk. The same could be said of Parks’s prophetic act. By refusing to move, her reputation as an upright citizen of Montgomery was now at risk of being forever redefined as that

²¹ Brinkley, *Rosa Parks* 14.

of a questionable troublemaker. In the aftermath of her act, Parks received a barrage of death threats.²² 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." Her act led directly to her losing her job and her husband's resignation from his barber's job.²³ 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's act and Jeremiah's purchase of the Anathoth field are also 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 Jeremiah's promise that one day, "houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" (Jeremiah 32:15b). Similarly, refusing to be coerced to vacate her 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 relied on a foundation of communal faith and religious conviction.

Comparisons with Gandhi's Salt March of 1930 are also instructive. Both Gandhi's march and Parks's refusal to move were public acts, performed by people considered to be weak or non-threatening by the dominant social powers. Both were challenging a relatively minor law but one that touched on fundamental quality of life issues for the oppressed population. And both acted out of sincere faith foundations and philosophical convictions, consciously choosing to defy laws that were unjust so that all people might experience a different quality of communal life.

When considering contemporary prophetic acts, these comparisons to biblical and historical precedents are helpful, yet not fully adequate in themselves. Theologian Paul Tillich has suggested that prophetic moments are also crisis moments, in which, at the "fullness of time," the negativities of society are challenged by bearers of a prophetic spirit. He described such prophetic activity as *kairotic* in nature, transformational and directed toward what is unconditional.²⁴ Is it then possible to speak about a *kairos* moment occurring on that December day in Montgomery, Alabama?

Throughout Brinkley's biography, one recurrent question is whether or

²² Ibid. 2; Parks, *Quiet Strength* 26–27.

²³ Brinkley, *Rosa Parks* 114, 145.

²⁴ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963) 3.213–14.

not Parks's 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."²⁵ 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."²⁶

Although she never uses the specific term *kairos*, this sense of the "fullness of time" is present in Parks's own summary of her action: "God provided me with the strength I needed at the precise time when conditions were ripe for change."²⁷ 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.

Rosa Parks's act of civil disobedience merits recognition as an example of a contemporary prophetic act. It was a deliberate act of witness, performed by a person grounded in a faith community and actively seeking to transform perceptions and practices within human society. The most fitting way to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Parks's historic act is to peel back the sentimental veneer from our recollections of that day. It is time to acknowledge finally the depth of prophetic spirit active both in Parks's faithful witness and in the larger community around her.

Before leaving the story of Rosa Parks, one final moment of irony is worthy of mention. The Montgomery bus boycott lasted for 13 months, until the Supreme Court rejected the segregationist position of the Montgomery City Commission and ordered that by December 20, 1956, all the buses be integrated by law. On the morning of December 21, 1956, a reporter and photographer from *Look* magazine knocked on Rosa Parks's 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 seated in the row behind her, just happened to be taken on a bus driven that day by James Blake.

²⁵ Brinkley, *Rosa Parks* 109. Also, in her book *Quiet Strength*, Parks writes: "It was time for someone to stand up—or in my case, sit down. I refused to move" (Parks, *Quiet Strength* 17–18).

²⁶ 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.

²⁷ Parks, *Quiet Strength* 38.