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BOOK REVIEW

Measuring his words

'The Word of the Lord Is Upon Me: The Righteous Performance of Martin Luther King, Jr.' by Jonathan Rieder Belknap/Harvard University Press: 394 pp., \$29.95

By David J. Garrow

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Preachers can say the darndest things, as perhaps you've heard. "God damn America," to take one recent controversial example, is pretty mild compared with other recorded pulpit snippets. Consider this denunciation of U.S. military behavior abroad: "[W]e are criminals in that war. We've committed more war crimes almost than any nation in the world." Or, similarly, calling the United States "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today" and condemning it for creating "concentration camps."

It sounds like the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. decrying the Iraqi civilian death toll and the infamous Abu Ghraib prison, right? Sorry, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. made those remarks in February 1968 and April 1967, attacking U.S. conduct in Vietnam.

Indeed, here's a historian's question for YouTube warriors on all sides of Sen. Barack Obama's presidential candidacy. "Is Obama Wright?," as one video has been titled? A powerful return volley could be "Is Obama King?" -- which thousands of voters may be asking themselves. In fact, if all the relevant film footage of King's sermons were readily available for viewing, the most accurate and instructive title would be "Is King Wright?" Or, better yet, "Is Wright King?" These questions and comparisons came to mind as I read Jonathan Rieder's rich, thoughtful new book, "The Word of the Lord Is Upon Me." Published to coincide with the 40th anniversary of King's assassination in Memphis, Tenn., on April 4, 1968, the book "is not biography, history, or theology," Rieder emphasizes. Instead, the Barnard College sociologist focuses on "King's

language and the way he deployed it," as distinct from King's public activism or the substance of his beliefs. The result is an extended meditation on the deeper meanings of the civil rights leader's words and how he used them, featuring a mosaic of carefully chosen and closely analyzed quotations.

"The Word of the Lord Is Upon Me" is an extremely learned book, one that Rieder has been working on for almost two decades (and he thanks this writer for answering a number of queries over the years). But he is surprisingly reluctant to draw explicit or broad conclusions. Successive sections consider the language King used in private discussion (some of which was recorded thanks to the FBI's extensive bugging and wiretapping of King) with African American friends as well as his preaching to black congregations, his overtly political addresses at civil rights rallies and what Rieder calls King's "crossover" orations and writings aimed at predominantly white audiences.

Uppermost in Rieder's treatment is his heartfelt desire to see King as a fundamentally universalist public voice rather than an essentially black voice. (King's 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech, particularly its oft-quoted line elevating "the content of their character" above "the color of their skin," is the most famous example of King's universalism.) Rieder tempers this argument at times, as when he acknowledges that "the image of the universalistic King" is partial and incomplete, but he admits his discomfort with the highly influential interpretations of King by the Rev. James H. Cone -- a theological mentor to Wright -- and Keith D. Miller, scholars who (like this writer) have viewed King first and foremost as a product of the black Baptist Church world in which he grew up.

Miller pioneered our understanding of the extent to which King, like many preachers, drew heavily from previous sermons composed by other ministers, many of whom were white, in his 1992 book on King, "Voice of Deliverance." Rieder acknowledges such work, and he notes the extent of King's word-for-word plagiarism throughout his graduate school course work, particularly in his unpublished doctoral dissertation.

But Rieder is too scrupulous a scholar to minimize King's blackness, so again and again his analysis acknowledges truths about King that stand in considerable tension with Rieder's universalist thesis. "Blackness for King was in certain respects incidental and interim," the author claims. But he also writes that King "was much more emphatic and enthusiastic with black audiences," that "King tended to reserve self-disclosure for black audiences" and that he exhibited a "reluctance to reveal himself before whites." Further on, Rieder notes -- accurately -- that "the King who spoke in black spaces beyond white scrutiny was often a more ethnic figure than the orator familiar to the public imagination."

Thus in his desire to reject what he calls "a romance of racial authenticity," one that says "the real King was the black King, and the black King was the one who talked black," Rieder falls victim to the thoroughness of his own scholarship. "[T]he things King tended to expunge from his talk in white venues were often significant," he admits, and that "sometimes diminished the power of the written and spoken words that King addressed to whites."

King "switched in and out of idioms as he moved between black and white audiences," performing "an elaborate dance of empathy" that struck different grace notes with different groups. Yet "the substance of King's message varied less than the code, style, or voice in which it was articulated," Rieder rightly observes.

Even the most self-consciously universalist public figures vary their speech. "There's no doubt that when I'm with a black audience, I slip into a slightly different dialect," Obama told *New York* magazine in 2006. That's especially true in a black church context, and Rieder notes how differently King spoke at Ebenezer Baptist Church -- the Atlanta church in which he grew up and to which he returned as co-pastor in 1960 -- than he did at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala., where he pastored from 1954 to 1960. Dexter was a relatively staid, middle-class church, Ebenezer a "more responsive . . . congregation." Rieder believes that King's "prophetic voice" was "submerged during the Dexter years," and he suggests that "we should not underestimate the power of the Dexter environment to shape King's style."

That insight aside, Rieder devotes little attention to tracing how "King's mood and tone evolved over the years." He acknowledges that while King's "undeniable changes over time . . . certainly deserve mention, my emphasis is on the continuities." He notes King's "deepening despondency," a physical, emotional and spiritual exhaustion in the final year of his life, but he doesn't explore how King's loss of hopefulness may have led to the angry, prophetic denunciations of the United States that some white audiences -- then and now -- might find as offensive as Wright's most notorious snippets.

Yet anyone who takes the time to peruse "The Word of the Lord Is Upon Me" will have no doubt: The real Martin Luther King Jr. more often sounded like Jeremiah Wright than like Barack Obama. *

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