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“A WAY OUT OF NO WAY”: A NOTE ON THE BACK-
GROUND OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN PROVERBIAL
SAYING

Abstract: The proverbial phrase “make a way out of no way,” common in the rhetoric of Martin Luther King and other African American writers and speakers in the twentieth century, was anticipated by very similar expressions among nineteenth-century Quakers—and before that by a sixteenth century Protestant Reformer.

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One of the most interesting portions of Wolfgang Mieder’s book on Martin Luther King’s “sermonic proverbial rhetoric” is the discussion of the proverbial phrase that gives the book its title, *Making a Way out of No Way* (2010, 171-86), with its full-proverb counterpart “God makes (can make) a way out of no way.” Mieder establishes that in the twentieth century such expressions occurred prominently in the speech of African Americans, especially preachers—possibly paraphrasing Isaiah 43:10, where God declares, “I will even make a way in the wilderness.” Certainly, to African Americans the “way” toward respect, economic sufficiency, and full civil rights has often seemed like a journey not just through a wilderness but through terrain where no way at all appears.

So the paradoxical expression became a leitmotif in King’s rhetoric, as he sought to give hope to his people and instill faith that God would eventually (“How long, O Lord, how long?”) lead to the fulfillment of that hope. In his use of the proverbial saying, King was following a tradition that gave the expression its currency and its power. To Mieder’s copious examples showing the common occurrence of the expression among African American orators and writers, I will add one that strikes me (being a Georgian!) as especially noteworthy: In 1994 King’s good friend, fel-

low Georgian, fellow civil rights activist, fellow Baptist preacher—and eventually a member of Congress, then U. S. ambassador to the United Nations, then mayor of Atlanta—Andrew Young titled his “spiritual memoir” *A Way out of No Way*.

King himself, in a 1957 sermon, associated the proverbial phrase with the famous English poet William Cowper (1731-1800), who, King said, was dissuaded from suicide upon entering a Paris cathedral and hearing a voice “talking about the man who could make a way out of no way” (King 1992-2007, 6:300-01). Probably King did not intend actually to attribute the expression to Cowper—or to the speaker (real or imagined) whom Cowper heard—and the source of his anecdote about the poet’s providential visit to the cathedral has not been discovered. Nonetheless, we might inquire into what lies behind the twentieth-century African American use of the expression.

In fact, versions—both as proverbs and as proverbial phrases—can be found rather abundantly among nineteenth-century Quakers, English and American. Mostly, the *way/no-way* dichotomy is intact, though sometimes we find, instead, the elliptical *way/none*. Another small variation is the occasional construing of *way* as abstract (“make way”) rather than concrete (“make a way”). None of the earlier instances, it should be noted, use the preposition *out of*, which is distinctive to the African American analogs, where it facilitates both a play on the idiom “a way out” and a possible non-spatial sense of miraculously transforming the very obstacle itself into a means of success.

1816. “...I am constrained to acknowledge that in all my various difficulties, distresses and dangers, the power and presence of One ...has been with me and around me, bringing about seeming impossibilities, making a way where no way was....” John Barclay, letter to “W. F.” (19 Sep.), *Friends’ Intelligencer* 23 (20 Oct. 1866): 499.

1823. “...I have had to endure the condescending goodness of our Heavenly Father, in making a way where there seemed to be none, in furnishing strength and ability to do His work....” William Allen (English scientist and abolitionist), letter to Czar Alexander I of Russia (29 Apr.). *Life of William Allen, with Selections from His Correspondence*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Henry Longstreth, 1847), 2:117.

1842. “How gracious and tender towards me was my heavenly Father,...making a way where no way appeared, and safely leading me forth.” John Barclay, “A Selection from the Letters and Papers of the Late John Barclay,” in William Evans and Thomas Evans, eds., *The Friends’ Library: Comprising Journals, Doctrinal Treatises, and Other Writings*, 14 vols. (Philadelphia: Joseph Rakestraw, 1837-1850), 6:452.

1848. “[S]eeing no way open but by urging on the seamen to exert themselves, looking unto Him who makes a way where none appears, I ventured on deck....” David Sands, *Journal of the Life and Gospel Labors of David Sands* (London: Charles Gilpin), 76-77.

1861. “She gave much pertinent counsel to her family and others, commending them to the Lord, and to put their trust in him who would care for them and make way where there appeared to be no way.” Obituary for Julia Ann Hadley of Monrovia, Indiana (died 1 Mar.), *Friends’ Review* 14 (13 Apr.): 505.

1862. “J. Backhouse made a brief report of our religious labours in the colony...and made a feeling acknowledgment of the goodness of Him who called us forth, and has been pleased to go before us, making a way where there seemed no way.” James Backhouse and Charles Tylor, *The Life and Labours of George Washington Walker of Hobart Town, Tasmania* (London: A. W. Bennett), 186.

1876. “...I would have all encouraged, for Divine goodness often makes a way, where to the human understanding there appears to be no way....” “A Testimony of Baltimore Monthly Meeting for the Western District” (quoting Jacob Lafetra), *Friends’ Intelligencer* 33 (8 Jun.): 307.

1881. “He [God] has been so kind and loving to us in times of trial, making a way ‘where there was no way,’ also in giving us so many to help forward the work.” Jonathan Ozrun, “Osage [Indian] Mission,” *Friends’ Review* 34 (2 Apr.): 541. Notice the quotation marks.

1881. “God led his people to a place where they were shut in.... He made a way where there was no way. He shows His power when His people need it most.” “Suggestions” (a series of miscellaneous thoughts), *Friends’ Review* 34 (Jul. 30): 813.

1885. "2. He makes a way where no way is." "Political Thoughts" (a numbered list of aphorisms and trenchant sayings), *Friends' Review* 39 (29 Aug.): 59.

1887. "...[S]ecret praise ascended to Him who melts away the mountain that seems impassable, making a way where there seemed no way." Laura S. Haviland (abolitionist, suffragette, and social reformer), *Woman's Life-Work: Labors and Experiences*, 3rd ed., (Chicago: C. V. Waite), 49.

1887. "In a short memorandum of the visit he records his thankfulness to his Heavenly Father for his continual care over him, often making way where there seemed to be none." "Eleazer Bales, of Indiana" (a memorial to Bales, who died 3 Aug. 1887), *The Friend* 61 (3 Dec.): 137.

1889. "We do praise our dear Father in heaven for thus making a way where there seemed to be no way...." Jonathan E. Cox and Sue V. Tomlinson, "Friends' Blue Ridge Mission of North Carolina," *Friends' Review* 43 (8 Aug.): 29.

1895. "When I look ahead sometimes I can't see how I can get along, but God makes way where there is no way." (Mr. or Ms.) Page of Logan County, Kansas, in *The Friend* 68 (23 Feb.): 248.

1905. And in the faith of that [,] we could only stand waiting to see what God would work, in making a way where there seemed no way." "The Prince of Peace Heard," *The Friend* 79 (9 Sep.): 65.

1909. "The visit to the meetings in our Quarterly Meeting, for which I was liberated before knowing thee was coming amongst us [,] was to me fresh evidence of the tender regard and compassion of our Heavenly Father, making a way where no way was seen." Phebe W. Roberts, undated letter to Elwood Dean, *Letters and Memoranda of Elwood Dean* (n.p.: Meeting for Sufferings of Ohio Yearly Meeting), 44-45.

The preponderance of nineteenth-century instances do appear in Quaker sources, though a smattering of others can be found. In a letter dated 18 November 1872 the Baptist minister Thomas Godwin, an Englishman, wrote, "Although I have had a trying path to travel in for many years, yet the Lord ..hath made a way where I could see no way" (Godwin 1878, 327). The very minor American

poet Stephen Hart (1782-1857), in a poem titled “To the Afflicted,” included this stanza:

Be not discourag’d, neither be dismay’d,
 Though you no onward path before may see;
 The arm Omnipotent hath often made
 A way where there appeared no way to be.

(Hart 1846, 55)

I find no evidence of Hart’s being a Quaker—or of his *not* being one.

It might be hypothesized that the nineteenth-century expression in wide currency among Quakers, so many of whom were active in the Abolition movement and (with their passion for social justice and their strict adherence to a credo of nonviolence) in the subsequent Civil Rights movement, migrated directly to the parlance and the oratory of twentieth-century African Americans—with the consistent “way where” altered to “way out of.” However, the use of the phrasing by Quakers and other Protestants itself had a possible source in the sixteenth century, even though the record from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is very skimpy.

The Reformer John Calvin used versions of the worshipful paradox several times, at least three in his Latin *Commentary on the Psalms* (1564), making it a sort of leitmotif in that work. It is conceivable that Calvin himself knew such a proverbial saying in Switzerland or in his native France. In Arthur Golding’s translation of 1571: “...[W]e may lerne, not to measure his [God’s] help by our owne wit, but (euen when we be plunged in the bottomlesse pittes) to refer our hope too the hand of GOD, whose proper tie it is too make vs way where no way is” (Calvin 1571, sig. 2I6^r). In the Latin, that last clause reads, “...*cuius proprium est viam per inuia patefacere*” (Calvin 1557, sig. U1^v [first signing])—literally, “to make a way through the impassable”; *inuia* is a plural adjective used nominatively, to effect the antithesis *via/in-via*. Elsewhere, Calvin says of God’s chosen, “...it is Gods part to make them a way where no way is” (Calvin 1571, sig. 3X5^v; “*viam per inuia monstrare*” [Calvin 1557, sig. L5^r, 2nd signing]); and again, David cannot escape his enemies “onlesse God doo ...open hym a way where no way is” (Calvin 1571, sig. B7^v; “*viam per inuia aperiat*” [Calvin 1557, sig. B1^v, first signing]). Golding’s English

opts for the sequence “a way *where*,” like the nineteenth-century Quaker versions—even though the Latin says “a way *through*” (“*viam per*”), which may more closely resemble the sense of the phrase “a way out of” in the African American version.

Certainly Martin Luther King, during his theological studies, could have encountered Calvin’s uses of the expression, perhaps as they appeared in the anonymous 1840 translation “based on the translation of Arthur Golding,” where Golding’s archaic “make vs way where no way is” has been replaced with “make a way where no way is” (Calvin 1840, 2:210-211). Yet, historically Calvin—with his predestinarian doctrines—was not notably influential on either Baptists or Quakers.

All we can safely conclude, then, is that versions of our proverb and proverbial phrase have occurred in different historical eras, attaining some prominence among Quakers in the nineteenth century and then among African Americans in the twentieth century. Of course, polygenesis is a possibility. Otherwise, the question of influences or other connections remains unresolved.

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