

**THE COVENANT FAITHFULNESS  
OF JESUS THE MESSIAH:**

**A NARRATIVE THEOLOGY OF  
OBEDIENCE AND NONVIOLENCE;  
PARTICULARITY AND CREDIBILITY**

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
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To my wife Jennifer

*“You have heard that it was said,  
‘you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’  
But I say to you,  
Love your enemies,  
And pray for those who persecute you.”*

Matthew 5:43-44 (NASB)



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## PREFACE

For nearly eight years, I have been working out a response to the love that God has made so evident to me. Much of that response has been made manifest in trying, often unsuccessfully, to live out the ethics of Jesus that reflect God's desire for humanity within the context of my Quaker faith. The other aspect of response has been my academic work, which have included four years at Kuyper College that did not begin until I was 33 years of age, and my three years at The Earlham School of Religion. I did not pick up a Bible before the twenty-first century, so everything this project suggests is the culmination of work done during this period of time.

My experience of God has not only been one of overwhelming grace and forgiveness, but an experience of wholeness that has carried over into my relationships with others in my life. The emphasis of this experience has centered upon baptismal renewal – and also of an *atoning* aspect of Jesus' presence on earth. As I experience YHWH as a God of unconditional love, and as a God who desires healthy relationships for created beings; the idea of a god that demanded "blood atonement" from an only son (or any son or daughter) was incomprehensible.

I am aware of the biblical texts, especially Hebrews, that reflect the first-century belief that Jesus' death was not only atoning for human sinfulness, but that it was predestined as such. But through the work of Mennonite authors like John Howard Yoder and J. Denny Weaver, I became aware of a narrative within the canon which reflected the importance - a salvific importance – to the life lived by Jesus. Jesus' death was not the necessary incarnational act of the Deity, but the life lived by Jesus as representative of God's desire is the key. Further study of YHWH as a covenant God led to reflections

upon a biblical narrative which encompassed the whole of the canon, and prioritized Jesus and the incarnational experience of those who follow him.

As for Hebrews, and the various proof-texts that speak to blood atonement, I follow Yoder's suggestion in believing that if anything, the Bible is a self-correcting text. If one believes overwhelmingly in the power of the text to underwrite theological specifics, there will be someone who can challenge that belief using claims supported by the same canonical text. Inevitably, our reading of the text mirrors our own aspirations for social, economic, or political *power*. Thus, one provides proofs for both sides of various social issues, not the least of which is the tendency of the Church to engage in acts of war based upon the same canon that provides a foundation for Christ-centered pacifism.

Thus, those readings of the text that most reflect God's desire will be those that, in the words of nearly every narrative theologian, produce the best fruit, or, as Stanley Hauerwas states, "The test of each story is the sort of person it shapes." While this might seem an enormously relative task, it remains to be the case that universal philosophies and theologies have failed miserably to produce the salvation that Christian communities believe was inaugurated by Jesus Christ.

This project produces a narrative reading that I believe will not only produce fruit, but challenges the universal claims of empires and nation states that it is human institutions that facilitate salvation. My project places salvation firmly on the shoulders of Jesus, then further reflected by communities of Christ that live out the ethic they believe is made normative through the ministry of Christ. While death may be a byproduct of such faith, it was never mandatory. Salvation, and the fruit-bearing human response to salvation, is the product of a faithful life.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I have been blessed by God to work with a faculty who are dedicated to bringing out the best in people. I am especially grateful to professor and theologian David Johns for suggesting this project, and then lobbying the faculty and dean to allow me to take on a Master of the Arts project in addition to my ongoing Master of Divinity studies.

Blessings to Paul and Trish Eckert, Julie Rudd, and Brian Young – all ESR students. Thanks to Matt Hisrich for reminding me that I'm not all that impressive.

Thanks to Steve Angell and Dean Jay Marshall for contributing to the independent studies that informed this project; and to Lonnie Valentine for continuously challenging my theology.

I am indebted to the Grace of the Living God, who is waiting patiently for me to be the person that Jesus reveals to be God desires me to be.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

EDB	<i>Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible</i>
EDT	<i>Evangelical Dictionary of Theology</i>
NIB	<i>New Interpreters Bible</i>
NASB	<i>New American Standard Bible</i>
NJB	<i>New Jerusalem Bible</i>
NRSV	<i>New Revised Standard Version</i>
PDP	<i>The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy</i>

## Introduction

The vice-president of the United States is, perhaps, a devout individual. It is not the fact that he sends Christmas cards during the season of giving that suggests such faith, but the message scrawled upon the gift. In the year of 2003, Dick Cheney utilized a quote from Benjamin Franklin to share the modern American spirit of Christmas with his supporters. "And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice" the card read, "is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?"<sup>1</sup>

A question is raised by Cheney's manner of piety, and it is not unique to the twenty-first century. To whom is this politician faithful? Is it the will of God as revealed through Jesus Christ at the center of Cheney's Christian faith? Or is he, and multitudes of other Americans, more concerned with the spirit of Ben Franklin and the *zeitgeist* of modernity, a spirit that insists that empire - necessarily in the form of free-markets and liberal democracies - are the universal saving grace of humanity? Indeed, the God of the Bible has worked with empires of various kinds to achieve an end. But is this God an agent of empire, called upon by regimes whose intentions are notably similar in all their manifestations?

How have those who have committed themselves in some manner to the first-century Galilean named Jesus supposed to respond to Cheney's assumptions about the God they believe is revealed in the life of Christ? Often, it seems as though any tension that might have existed between the claims of the deity and the claims of empire has

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1 Dick Cheney, Christmas card for the 2003 season, quoted by Timothy Noah, "The Imperial Vice-Presidency: Dick Cheney Says the E-Word" in *Slate* Dec. 17, 2003; <http://slate.msn.com/id/2092800>; internet; accessed 10/30/06, cited in Joerge Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis:Fortress Press, 2007), 63.

been eased in the worldview of the West, or more succinctly, the mindset of most Americans. Even conservative politics in the West considers the nation-state as the fullest expression of God's will, and the primary vehicle for the dissemination of divine policy. The providence of YHWH has been replaced by the policies and politics of liberal democracies.

This project proposes that empire of any sort not only exists in tension with the will of God, but is also an agent of opposition to God's desire for humanity. I intend to show that YHWH has intentionally valued human relationships that defy the morals and ethics of political regimes, and has engaged the divine self in covenant relationships that facilitate human liberation from the dominating machinations of empire. The biblical story is a continuing narrative, the story of a God who has made covenant with human agents, and fulfilled covenant obligations through God's own faithfulness – God's own righteousness. This salvific faithfulness to covenant is consummated in the life of Jesus Christ. The fruits of such faithfulness consist of communities who witness publicly to the righteousness of YHWH, who often suffer on account of this witness; and engage in the practice of social justice according to the desire of YHWH as exhibited in the life of Christ. The love of both neighbor and enemy are the primary motivation for the faith and practice of communities of Christ. I state that, throughout history, it has most often been empire that has stood in opposition to such praxis, yet communities of faith continue despite the marginalizing dominance of political and economic powers.

I then suggest that such a narrative is credible to twenty-first century sensibilities in the manner that it is intended - as a story about a God who acts in history – and

whose actions are made tangible by communities of Christ. The credibility of the narrative of YHWH, Israel, Jesus and the Church, is facilitated by the actions of those communities that pattern their lives on such accounts of history, and in response to the reality of a Creator God.

Empire, however, is simply the most visible manifestation of opposition to the desire of God – created beings have proven oppositional regardless of their social configuration. According to Scripture, humanity has from the beginning sought independence from the Creator, seeking to satisfy certain individual desires, including the desire for the knowledge of truth independent of God’s faithful guidance. (Gen. 3:1-7) To remedy this estrangement, God decided upon a course of action in which covenant relationships became the foundation for the reconciling of a humanity divorced from its intended purpose. This project *assumes* that God created humanity solely for the purpose of relationships, both between humanity and the deity, and between humans as such. The project shows that through covenant faithfulness, YHWH has made reconciliation possible through the full revelation of divine desire. God’s offer of salvation rescues communities from the subservience demanded by empire.

The challenges to this claim by Enlightenment thinkers and more recent philosophical thought, are not entirely inconsistent with the challenges met by the Apostle Paul and the early Church. At every point in history, the claims made by followers of Jesus have been thought of as somewhat incredible. While failed revolutions have always been common, non-violent revolutions are thought to be a contradiction in terms. Furthermore, the proposal that the failed revolutionary was

resurrected by God in vindication of his faithfulness simply fuels the fires of incredulity. Yet, modernism and postmodernism have suggested that the particularity of the claim is more problematic. Modernism has tried to make rational the example of Jesus by appropriating the story to underwrite more universal claims. The pacifism of Jesus has no place in the Enlightenment world of justifiable violence as a means to an end. The hope of resurrection is marginalized by the empiricist who insists such a claim defies evidence.

Postmodern critics challenge the particularity of the witness of Jesus communities by relativizing them, not only as being patently untruthful among a plethora untruthful rivals, but patently oppressive in the very idea that they claim to be truthful. While postmodernism may value the story of Jesus and personal experiences of followers, they refuse the possibility that any constructive end can be achieved through the public witness of Jesus communities.

Much of this project deals with truth in one manner or another, and describes the battle between various entities that lay claim to the role of authoring the outcome of history. Perhaps the truth is found somewhere in the suggestion that the oppressive nature of such claims are inherent because they rely on power as the means to control the outcome of history. Communities of Christ insist that YHWH is in control of history, and that the knowledge of such is a *gift*, a truth which cannot be coercively injected into the human psyche, but must be openly received in the environs of relationship between one person and the "other." If the truth is to be known, it will not be through the enforcement of universal utilitarian values, but through the vindication of the story of

those whose claim is made credible by their commitment to patiently awaiting the outcome of history. As the people of God await the outcome, they make the story of Jesus credible by serving both neighbor and enemy, and healing the brokenness that results from the truth-claims authored by human “sovereigns,” whether they be emperors, kings, or presidents. As the Bible suggests, even the representatives of such sovereigns are at a loss to identify truth.

# Chapter One

## A Narrative Theology of Jesus Christ and the People of God

*"...You say that I am a king,  
For this I was born  
and for this I came into the world;  
To testify to the truth.  
Everyone being of truth listens my voice."*

*Pilate says to him,  
"What is truth?"*

John 18:37-8 (NRSV)

It would be anachronistic to attribute postmodern assumptions to Pontius Pilate's cynical response to Jesus of Nazareth. Yet, if anyone in first-century C.E. Palestine was able to successfully manipulate truth to a degree, it would have been Pilate. As an official representative of Caesar, Pilate most likely achieved familiarity with a host of truth claims that countered those of Rome, especially from those persons representative of Judea's national interests. Of course, as the truth of empire goes, even those representatives of Israel acquiesced to the ever present fact of Roman legions, and state succinctly in John 19:15, "We have no king but Caesar." Indeed, Pilate knew this all along. Pilate knew "the truth."

The Bible, both Hebrew and Greek Testaments, has plenty to say about the truth asserted by empires of the past. The national history of Israel is based not only on promises made to Abraham and Sarah, but is witness as well to the mighty acts of YHWH, who liberates slaves, drowns entire armies, knocks down city walls and raises up a monarchy that brought glory to the people who claimed to be YHWH's own. However,

when the monarchy subverts the intentions of Israel's God, empires are used according to their various ancient Near-Eastern configurations to put an end to the injustices and unfaithfulness that the Hebrew prophets attribute to the leaders of Judah and Israel.<sup>2</sup>

It seems throughout the ages, many ancient Yahwists, including early followers of Jesus who saw him as an incarnation of God, have consistently held that their God is king, and Caesar – or anyone else who claims similar titles - is not. Christ-followers insisted this was the truth, in no uncertain terms, and such communities engaged in acts of overt resistance to affirm nothing other than this: There is a sovereign God who acts in history, whether through Exodus, Exile or Messiah, to rescue creation from the machinations of those who oppose God's will. Generally, this opposition took the form of empire.<sup>3</sup>

Communities of Jesus Christ claim that God's will is fully represented in the life and ministry, and the death and resurrection, of the Nazarene. Against what is often deemed obviously contradictory evidence, such communities claim that the world has been significantly changed by the actions of YHWH as undertaken through the ministry of Jesus, and that a new age has dawned. Through Jesus, his followers state, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no Jew or

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2 Texts such as Habakkuk, First Isaiah, and Daniel attribute a sovereignty to YHWH that not only uses empire as a tool of judgment against Israel, but that stands firmly in judgment of political and economic injustice in any grandiose form.

3 The use of the term empire throughout this project is not intended to imply that any specific modern regime is singularly guilty of manufacturing truth claims or systematically oppressing marginalized or weaker nations or peoples. Instead, the term empire is used to identify ever-present controlling economic realities that become all encompassing beyond the intention or control of any one political power. Empire is recognized in economic forces such as capitalism or socialism as much or more than it represents any singularly dominating nation state and/or neo-colonial relationships between states.



Greek, there is not slave nor free, there is not male and female, for you are all one man in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3:27-28)

Just as the stories of the Exodus and the crossing of the Jordan have been remembered and retold, so has the event of the resurrection of Jesus, the missionary exploits of Paul, or the praxis of the early Christ communities. For centuries, these stories have been claimed as representative of truth. They affirm the existence of a God who rolls up the divine sleeves and works in history, through every-day people, to accomplish the rescue of humanity from the truth claimed by others: that the world is an oppressive place with authority solely in the hands of the powerful, the rich, and the strong.

According to those outside of the Body of Christ, politics is truth - the reality of an unfair world. Stalin once responded to the criticisms of his policies by the Catholic Church by asking, "How many divisions has the Pope?" According to those who see the world through the filters of "rational and empirical truth"; democracy and free markets -or MSW's and nation states - are the means through which humanity is saved from its own brokenness.<sup>4</sup> Yet again, followers of Jesus claim something else. Followers of Jesus live according to an ethic that fails to meet the criterion of those philosophical projects that claim a basis in an epistemology built upon the foundation of rational and empirical thinking.

Christ-centered communities hold that the stories of the Exodus and the

<sup>4</sup> The argument here is not to suggest that social sciences are contrary to the beliefs of the Church, but to suggest that much of Christendom has come to rely upon human service organizations to relieve the Church from fulfilling its "Acts 2" or "Romans 12" obligations.

resurrection are representative of a God who is the final arbiter of truth. Communities of Christ claim "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God," and "Blessed are you hungering now, for you will be filled." (Luke 6:20-21) Followers of Jesus insist that loving the enemy and praying for those who persecute you (Matt. 5:45) is the reflection of YHWH's will for humanity as revealed through the life of God's Messiah. As such, love of enemies is an act of truth.

A postmodern Pilate might respond to such a claim exactly as the Pilate of the first-century responded to Jesus. What *is* truth? Is the truth that oppressive systems dominate humanity, and that every truth claim is indeed a practice in oppressive tactics? Is the truth found in the promises of liberal democracy or Marxism, and of science and academics only? Are all religious truth claims relative? I suggest that many of the truth claims proposed by the early Christ-communities have been relativized by the church of the Enlightenment. Many of the questions posed by Enlightenment thinkers, and subsequent postmodern philosophical thought, will be addressed in Chapter Four of this project. I intend to explore the claims of the followers of Jesus that were made in the first century as well as those put forth in the twenty-first.

Presently, with an emphasis on the narrative qualities of life and Scripture, of worldview and faith communities; I will engage the Hebrew Scriptures and first-century Christian literature in order to reflect upon the way ancient stories helped to order early communities of faith. I will also propose a theology that makes much of the Judeo-Christian narrative, but reflects a nuanced approach to the traditional story that makes use of centuries of faithfulness in tandem with the idea of continuing revelation. I intend

this narrative reading as one most fully representative of a theology that makes use of the Bible, tradition, and the normative qualities of Jesus Christ as the foundational characteristics of true communities of Christ.

## **Empire and the People of God**

### **THE STORY OF YHWH AND THE EXODUS**

The event of the Exodus is the foundational story of the Hebrew narrative, and defines, not only YHWH's relationship with Israel, but also God's relationship with empire. Though their ancestors had helped Egypt develop into a Mediterranean military and economic power (as the story of Joseph and his brothers suggests in Genesis 37-47), the descendants of Abraham and Sarah are enslaved, and their future is in question when the Egyptian authorities are threatened by their growing numbers. In response to their ever increasing population, and the coinciding dangers to security represented by the multitude of slaves, Pharaoh increases the labor load of the Hebrews, and then issues a mandate that every male infant be put to death, so that no uprising might take place. (Exod. 1:15-16) The oppressed Hebrews looked for rescue from their plight, though what kind of rescuer they hoped for is unknown. The Israelites simply "groaned under their slavery." That groaning was heard. Their "cry for help rose up to God," and in response, biblical writers recount that "God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them." (2:23-25)

The ensuing contest of wills between Pharaoh and YHWH over the fate of the slaves sets the tone for the rest of the Judeo-Christian narrative's rendering of the power struggles between empire and God. God intends to liberate the enslaved Israelites from

bondage. "I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and bring them out of that land to a good and broad land." (3:7-8) When God chooses Moses to lead the Israelites from bondage (much to the chagrin of Moses), the Creator sends him with the full knowledge that Pharaoh will not acquiesce to the loss of his labor force. "I know," states God to Moses, "that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless commanded by a mighty hand." (3:19) Also, while the prophet is equipped to perform signs of wonder on behalf of God, ultimately the showdown is not between Moses and the magicians of Pharaoh, but between God and the military might of the empire.

After a series of confrontations, YHWH declares, upon continued obstinacy by Pharaoh, that every first born human and animal of Egypt will be slain if Israel is not set free. The slaughter is initiated (12:29) and the event of the Passover occurs as each Israelite household is spared from the disaster. The Hebrews are subsequently led out of the grasp of empire toward freedom. Pharaoh, of course, is not about to lose his cheap labor force without a fight. This occurs, however, because YHWH intends to make evident that the power of God hangs heavy over the oppressive machinations of empire. The Exodus narrative draws to a close with the final, desperate attempt by Pharaoh to return the Hebrews to their slave status. He musters the full might of his army, "Six hundred picked chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them," and pursues and overtakes the Israelites, who are stuck between an army and the Red Sea. (14:5-10) Interestingly, in a fit of mistrust, Israel cries out, blaming both YHWH and Moses for their seemingly imminent demise.

“But Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you.’” (14:13-14) Indeed, YHWH parts the very waters that had made the Hebrews so vulnerable, and they march across dry land, watching as the sea closes behind them and swallows up the entirety of Pharaoh’s armed forces. “I shall gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers,” God says to Moses, “And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh.” (14:17-18)

Walter Brueggemann writes “the narrative of the Exodus is designed to show the radical criticism and radical delegitimizing of the Egyptian Empire.”<sup>5</sup> He describes the Exodus narrative in terms of liberation as a highlighted theme of Scripture. The event is a “radical delegitimizing” of Pharaoh and taskmasters as “vanquished, humiliated, and banished from history.”<sup>6</sup>

The very suggestion of omnipotence on the part of empire is first challenged when the magicians of Egypt can not match God’s power in Exodus 8:17-18.

The Egyptian empire could not! The gods of Egypt could not! The scientists of the regime could not! The imperial religion was dead! The politics of oppression had failed! That is the ultimate criticism, that the assured and alleged power of the dominate culture is now shown to be fraudulent. Criticism...is asserting that false claims to authority and power cannot keep their promises, which they could not keep in the face of the free God.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the narrative, YHWH is shown, not only to marginalize Pharaoh’s claims to divine sovereignty over and against the God of Israel, but is shown to be using

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5 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* 2d ed., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 9.

6 *ibid.* 9,10.

7 *ibid.* 11.

Pharaoh to display the nature of the divine relationship with empire in general. Not only is the story of the Exodus foundational to remembering the origins of Israel, but it is also representative of the general attitude of ancient Yahwists toward the sundry power-hungry states that fought their way over and through the land of Palestine. Whether the empire involved was that of Egypt, or later Canaan, or still later Assyria and then Babylon, YHWH has always been represented as the sovereign over and against empire, even when - as in the Book of Habakkuk - manipulating the designs of such entities to carry out divine tasks.

The Exodus is not however, a solitary salvific event. Equally important, and woven into the larger narrative of which the Exodus is a catalyst are the covenants that YHWH enters into with Abraham, with a liberated Israel, and later, with king David. Also, the Deuteronomic covenant, according to Gustavo Gutierrez, is “the covenant that gives full meaning to the liberation from Egypt; one makes no sense without the other...The covenant and the liberation from Egypt were different aspects of the same movement... which led to an encounter with God.”<sup>8</sup> Presently I will introduce an overview of the covenants of the Hebrew Bible, and how the Exodus and covenant events take on meaning for those of a Christ-centered faithfulness. To be sure, I intend to show that covenant is the aspect of the Creator/creation relationship that lends full meaning to the ministry of Jesus.

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<sup>8</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 89.

## The Promises of YHWH

*Now the Lord said to Abram,  
"Go forth from your country, from your relatives and your father's house,  
to the land which I will show you,  
and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you,  
and make your name great, and so you shall be a blessing;  
And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse.  
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."  
Genesis 15:1-3 (NASB)*

Those Hebrews liberated from Egypt were the descendents of the sons of Jacob; the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham. After the apparent failures of Adam and Eve and their descendents (Gen. 4, 6:7), and the consequent tendency of the descendents of Noah's family toward self-aggrandizement and competition with the Creator (represented by the Tower of Babel story in Gen 11), YHWH seeks out a childless couple through which to establish a reconciling relationship with creation. It is through the descendents of Abraham and Sarah that God intends to build a nation by which "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" and be reconciled to their Creator. (Gen. 12:3) For this process of reconciliation to begin, YHWH promises to Abraham (at this time known as Abram) and Sarah (Sarai) that their offspring will receive the land of the Canaanites (12:6-7) as an inheritance.

Abraham, however, questions this pledge when it is reiterated by God at a later meeting. "I am your shield, your reward shall be great," states the deity in a vision. (15:1) Abraham responds with a measure of disbelief. "Oh Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless...you have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." (15:2-3) YHWH declares further that Abraham should "look toward

heaven and count the stars...so shall your descendents be.” While Abraham seemingly believes this promise (“and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.” 15:6), he questions further about the land. “How am I to know that I shall possess it?” (15:8)

This compels YHWH to make a covenant with Abraham in the tradition of the ancient Near-East. The participants walk between the divided carcasses of sacrificed animals, “Thereby invoking death upon themselves should they be unfaithful to the terms of the covenant.”<sup>9</sup> At Genesis 15:9-11, God instructs Abraham to “bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” Abraham brings the animals, and divides them to make a pathway so as to walk between the halves.

Abraham awaits the presence of God to act, not daring to walk down the aisle of carcasses. It is implied that Abraham knows he cannot uphold covenant responsibilities. When YHWH does appear to establish the covenant, Abraham enters into a terrifying sleep and experiences a theophany in which the deity appears dually in the manner of a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch. The author of this passage writes, “on that day, the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying ‘to your descendents I give this land.’” (15:18) As such, The God of Abraham has promised to uphold the covenant obligations into the future, for both the divine self - and on behalf of Abraham and his descendents.

The first covenant made with Abraham apparently requires no obedience in return for YHWH’s continued faithfulness. God’s own faithfulness is paramount in the covenants of Genesis 12 and 15. It should be remembered, however, that a two-party

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<sup>9</sup> Terence E. Fretheim “Genesis” *The New Interpreters Bible (NIB)* Vol. I. ed., Leander Keck et.al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 446.



covenant was made, and that faithfulness will be required on God's behalf, in the place of the failures of the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. However, a change occurs in the covenantal language of Genesis 17.

While the same promises of descendants, and blessings of nations are duplicated in Genesis 17 (vs.2), there is the condition of faithfulness on the part of Abraham and his progeny for the covenant to be fully effective. Abraham must walk before God, "and be blameless." (17:1) Terence Fretheim believes this call to obedience is implied in every covenant YHWH makes, whether it be with Noah, Abraham, or later, David. He writes, "one should understand covenant here as a royal grant...It bears close similarities to the covenants with Noah (Gen. 9:10-17) and David (2 Sam. 7:18; 23:5) involving stability, eternity, and unconditionality, (though not apart from faithfulness)."<sup>10</sup> The demand for obedience as a necessary response to covenant is additionally evident at Genesis 18:19, "that [Abraham] may charge his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

## **The Covenant at Sinai**

In the Book of Exodus, God chooses to make the divine personal name known to Moses (Exod. 3:13-15) so that the Israelites will know upon their liberation who it is that they are covenantally bound to. The sharing of the personal name is important in the ancient world, not only because it allows for the identification of the deity, but because it identifies the nature of the relationship between the deity and the people. William

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10 *ibid.* 458

Dumbrell sees the act of self-identification on behalf of YHWH as an act that invites trust. “Without proper recognition of the deity concerned,” writes William Dumbrell, “There could be no relationship...Where the name, however, was given, the deity had given himself [*sic*] to the worshippers...in commitment and trust.” In the act of self-identification, YHWH “is seen to be Israel’s special possession.”<sup>11</sup>

I have shared an overview of the Exodus event above, yet there is more than the act of liberation; the notion of obedience is explicit from the very beginning. From the start, Hebrew midwives are blessed by God for defying Pharaoh’s command to kill the male Hebrew infants. (1:20) Even more explicit, however, is the requirement of obedience during the event of the Passover. (Chapter 12) Also, it is not an isolated expectation, but a liturgy is commanded so that future generations will remember the act of salvation. The verse is still recited at modern Seders, “And when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this observance?’ you shall say, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD.’” (12:26-27)

Furthermore, obedience as praxis is instituted after the liberation from bondage is complete. YHWH renews covenant promises, this time, with the descendents of Abraham and Sarah, who appear as numerous as promised, and are on their way toward the promised land. God speaks to Moses, who is to tell the Israelites, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you up on eagles wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all my peoples.” (19:3-5) The covenant obligations of Israel

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11 William J. Dumbrell *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of Old Testament Covenants*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishing, 1984), 56.

are then spelled out in the following chapters of Exodus.

The Decalogue of Exodus 20 provides for the foundational link between liberation and covenant. From the beginning of the monologue detailed in 20:1-18, YHWH provides a liturgical formula that is repeated throughout the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...” It is not only that that God remembers promises, however, that marks the relationship. The Ten Commandments suggest by their nature that Israel’s covenant response to YHWH’s liberating act is to be a response that satisfies God’s desire for justice to be served. “The commands are a decisive way,” writes Brueggemann, “In which Israel (and Yahweh) intend to sustain and institutionalize the revolutionary social possibility that is asserted and enacted in the exodus narratives.”<sup>12</sup> He quotes Norman Gottwald as stating that the narrative recalling the origin of the Decalogue is a “recital of liberation...Israel initiates a revolutionary social experiment in the world, to see whether exploitive modes of social relationship can be sustained in the world.”<sup>13</sup> The Decalogue, however, has more to say about empire than might be readily evident at first glance.

Exodus 20:1-17 reads very much like other vassal treaties that bound ancient Near-Eastern rulers and their subjects. Yet, while Decalogue might represent an early oral tradition, it is the exilic redactors who add considerable meaning to the original code. “Unlike ancient Near-Eastern treaties where the god grants the laws and the earthly

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12 Walter Brueggemann “Exodus” *NIB* Vol. I, 839.

13 Norman K. Gottwald *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250-1050 BC*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), 200-226 quoted in Brueggeman “Exodus” 840.

kings dispense divine justice,” writes David Pleins, “The Ten Commandments...impose on each and every member of the community...the duty of fostering the workings of a just society.”<sup>14</sup>

We might see in these formulations of the Ten Commandments the makings of a subtle critique of monarchy and the attempt to limit its power. Such an understanding of social authority and political power would be consistent with what we know about both E[lohism] and D[euteronomistic] H[istorian]...[who] present a formidable program of restrictions against unbridled monarchy.<sup>15</sup>

Pleins calls the manner in which the Ten Commandments are addressed to “you” in the singular sense is a “radically egalitarian form of address – egalitarian...in a restricted [male landowners] but key sense a *communal* political enterprise.”<sup>16</sup> As such, the Decalogue of both Exodus and Deuteronomy provide, not only for a community-wide standard or social contract, but a vassal treaty that *limits* the authority of the monarchy. Also, Exodus continues after the issuance of the Decalogue to further delineate covenant obligations in law code form, some of which focus exclusively on issues of social justice.

The “Book of the Covenant,” the law code that begins at Exodus 21, continues through 23:19, begins with the matter of social justice. It establishes limits upon slavery, including a mandate to free Hebrew debt slaves after six years of servitude.<sup>17</sup> (21:2) There are a litany of mandates protecting the integrity of potentially marginalized peoples. Prohibitions against oppressing resident aliens, and the abuse of widows and

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14 J. David Pleins *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001), 48.

15 *ibid.*

16 *ibid. italics original*

17 The irony of suggesting that limits upon terms of forced labor represent “progressive” social contracts is not hidden. Foremost, the slavery addressed is debt-bondage, and Brueggemann suggests that the limitations suggest that “Israel is willing to curb the demands of the economy...in concrete practice, it does not do so in an unambiguous manner.” Walter Brueggemann “Exodus,” 862.

orphans, prohibitions against charging interest or holding back pledges are found at 21:21-27. "If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate." (21:26-27)

Further protection against marginalization is provided for in Chapter 23. "You shall not join hands with the wicked to act as a malicious witness. You shall not follow a majority in wrongdoing...you shall not side with the majority so as to pervert justice. (23:1-3). Exodus 23:4-5 foreshadows the command of Jesus to love one's enemy by commanding that "when you come upon your enemy's oxen or donkey going astray, you should bring it back. When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, you must help to set it free." Sabbatical years also remember the plight of the poor of Israel. "For six years you shall sow your land and gather its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat." (23:10) "Justice toward the poor is, at least in the text's latest redaction," writes Pleins, "Central to the Covenant Code's commentary." The possibility of disenfranchisement weighs heavily on the minds of the author(s), and this aspect of Israelite social contracts are unique in comparison to other ancient law codes.<sup>18</sup>

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18 *ibid.* 47.

## DAVIDIC COVENANT AND JUSTICE

*The LORD swore to David a sure oath  
from which he will not turn back:  
“One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne.  
If your sons keep my covenant  
and my decrees that I shall teach them,  
their sons also, forevermore, shall sit on your throne.”*

Psalm 132:11-12 (NRSV)

While the nation of Israel might never have come close to achieving empire status itself, there are constant overtones throughout the narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures that suggest imperial designs were not foreign to the desire of certain segments of the population. The text of 1 Samuel identifies an apparent jealousy of their national neighbors on the part of the people of Israel, who insist upon a change in their form of governance. Once governed primarily by charismatic judges who appeared at moments of military crisis or filled other leadership gaps, when the prophet and judge Samuel prepares to step down from leadership, the people demand that a king shall be chosen to rule the nation. “You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint a king over us, then, a king to govern us, like the other nations.” (1 Sam. 8:4-5) When the prophet shares with YHWH the people’s intentions, the deity feels forsaken, “Just as they have done to me from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day.” (8:8)

YHWH directs Samuel to remind the Israelites about what it is like to be ruled under the thumb of a monarchy. Kings are apt to conscript sons for military service, and, indeed, maintain a standing army that is every ready to carry out the monarch’s imperial designs. The whole of the economy will change into a war economy, implies YHWH.

He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots, and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands

and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and to make implements of war and the equipment of his chariots...<sup>19</sup>

The scenario is strikingly similar to the moment during the Exodus when, faced with the dangers of relying upon their God for deliverance at the Red Sea, the people cry out for a return to the familiarity of the dominance of monarchical authority.

What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, “Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians?” For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.<sup>20</sup>

In the 1 Samuel text, the people are equally intent on the predictability of human political authority, and, human reliance upon the politics of military power. “We are determined to have a king over us, so that we may be like all the other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.” (1 Sam. 8:19-20) Bruce Birch attributes this motivation, however, to more than a simple desire to emulate national neighbors. Israel has reached a decision to “give up the difficult vocation of covenant community, which makes them different. Self-interest and status seem to occupy them,” writes Birch, “And they make a more emotional than thoughtful response.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, the David narratives of the Samuel corpus bear out, and as with other texts, YHWH is portrayed as a covenantal God; whether it be in relationship with Abraham, in a compact of liberation and response to the Exodus event, or, with a monarch who is known by an author of Samuel as a man after God’s own heart. (1 Sam. 13:14) Presently I will look at the covenant with David.

Israel’s first king, Saul son of Kish, is disobedient to YHWH, an impetuous monarch who wins military battles against the national arch-enemy but offends God’s

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19 1 Samuel 8:11-12.

20 Exodus 14:11b-12.

21 Bruce C. Birch “First and Second Samuel” *NIB* Vol. II, 1029.

will at every turn. However, his successor David is exactly the type of king that Israel might have envisioned. David, even more so than Saul, is a warrior king – one whose obedience is never in question, even when his life is pursued by a jealous Saul. In fact, even Saul admits that David, in terms of covenantal relationship, is more “righteous” than himself in the midst of confrontation. (1 Sam 24:17)

King David is not only a man after God’s heart, however, but a ruler firmly entrenched in the ancient Near-East model of ruling authority. David is a hero to all and when he is firmly established as the king of Israel; a king who has brought peace, brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, and prosperity to the people; he intends to build a dwelling for the presence of YHWH. “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” (2 Sam. 7:2) However, this intention to build a temple for the deity is not an entirely altruistic endeavor. Temple building was an act of legitimization on the part of David, with legitimacy being assumed with the deity’s residence in the temple. The story, however, takes an interesting turn, after David makes his intentions known to the prophet Nathan and God.

YHWH rejects David’s overture to build the temple rejecting with it, according to Brueggemann, the monarch’s attempts to “domesticate” the divine presence and patronize the deity with “luxury.”<sup>22</sup> The Creator issues a reminder to David, through the prophet Nathan, that such attempted domestication will not earn favor. “I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day.” (7:6) Also, YHWH reminds David who is in charge of Israel’s, and especially David’s, destiny. “I took you from the pasture, from following sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I

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22 Walter Brueggemann “First and Second Samuel” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 258.



have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth.” (7:8-

9) YHWH then proceeds to make covenant with David.

Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me...But I will not take my steadfast love from him...Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.<sup>23</sup>

This covenant does not render the preceding covenants obsolete, but is interminable with YHWH’s prior promises.

The Davidic covenant did not displace the Sinai covenant. God’s promise to David was understood to stand in continuity with God’s previous acts of salvation...The conditional “if” of covenant is now encompassed by the “nevertheless” of unconditional promise. Obedience to covenant requirements is still demanded. Judgment, even of Davidic kings, is still the consequence of covenantal disobedience...But the Davidic kingdom is everlasting.<sup>24</sup>

The “if” condition of prior covenants now stands within a Davidic obligation that disobedience cannot terminate the covenant, as may have been supposed from the event at Sinai. There will be sanctions and punishments for covenant breakdowns on the part of Israel or the House of David, “but they are not terminal.”<sup>25</sup> One should not forget the possibility of required obedience, however, in Psalm 132:12, which declares that “if your sons keep my covenant, and the decrees I teach them, their sons forevermore shall sit on your throne.” Other Psalms play a significant role in establishing the importance of obedience in the Davidic covenant.

Psalm 2 places David in a familiar ancient Near-East role of a ruling “son of the

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23 2 Samuel 7:11-16

24 Birch, 1255.

25 Brueggemann, “First and Second Samuel” *Interpretation*, 256f.

divine.” The use of “decree” of 2:7 (see Psalm 105:10 where “decree” is synonymous with “covenant”) reveals that YHWH is giving birth to a new agent of God’s rule.<sup>26</sup> The Psalm also reflects, in continuity with the promises of Genesis, that all nations of the earth will answer to the descendents of Abraham and Sarah. Psalm 72 is also related to the Davidic covenant, as a work attributed to Solomon. There is a suggestion in this Psalm that blessings promised to the Davidic monarchy are contingent upon faithfulness to the will of YHWH, such as caring for the poor and afflicted, delivering the needy, and rescuing the oppressed from domination. (Ps. 72:12-14) In response to such faithfulness, Psalm 72 promises “an abundance of grain,” a flourishing city, and, again in the vein of the Abrahamic covenant, a blessing to the nations. (vs.15-17)

Psalm 89 is dedicated to the promises to David. Written in response to what were troubled times for the people of Israel, Psalm 89 remembers “I have made a covenant...I have sworn to David my servant, I will establish your descendents forever, and build up your throne to generations.” (vs.4) Yet, Psalm 89 also promises divine retribution for the sins of the sons of David. “If his children forsake my law...If they violate my statutes...I will punish their transgressions.” (vs.30-31) YHWH then declares “I will not violate my covenant ...I will not lie to David. His line shall continue forever.” (vs.35b-36) Despite the troubled events that inform this Psalm, it is the Davidic covenant that offers hope to the people of Israel. The Psalmist yearns for the return of YHWH to bless God’s people. “Where is your steadfast love...which by your faithfulness you swore to David” (vs.49) It is likely that this Psalm is an overt expression of the pain of exile, as is the last Davidic

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26 J. Clinton McCann Jr., “Psalms” *NIB* Vol. IV, 689.

Psalm, 132, which recalls 2 Samuel 6-7 and expresses hope for a post-exilic generation.<sup>27</sup>

Birch writes that 2 Samuel 7, and other texts recalling the Davidic covenant such as Psalm 132, “makes clear that God’s promise to David would endure, even though times of chastising judgment would arise. (This emphasis might have been especially important to the exilic audience of the Deuteronomistic History.)”<sup>28</sup> John Ottwell finds a similar significance:

The royal covenant, which provided the structure for the Israelite understanding of its relationship with Yahweh, ended with the promise of blessing if the covenant were kept, or a curse if it were violated...That which is pictured for us by the Deuteronomic historians is the deterioration of the new relationship of God, king, and people begun by David. Solomon was a completely Canaanite king, “even the Temple he built for Yahweh was Canaanite in plan and decoration.”<sup>29</sup>

With the mentions of Deuteronomic history above, I will presently move into the Book of Deuteronomy, which draws from a variety of sources and redactors to pull all of the covenants, the Exodus event, and the command for social justice together into a formidable text that “becomes the predominant voice of covenantalism in the Old Testament. A theological framework that decisively shapes much of the Old Testament, and much of Jewish and Christian theology that follows therefrom”<sup>30</sup> Deuteronomy develops the early “Book of the Covenant” of Exodus and represents a true second-giving of the “Torah.”<sup>31</sup> It also reflects upon the Davidic monarchy and gives voice to the

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27 McCann, 1211.

28 Birch, 1255.

29 John Ottwell, *I Will Be Your God: A Layman’s Guide to Old Testament Study*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press; 1967) 86; also citing G.E. Wright *Biblical Archeology*, (Philadelphia; Westminster, 1957), 136-45, concerning the temple plans

30 Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003), 90.

31 Ronald E. Clements, “Deuteronomy” *NIB* Vol. II, 284.

generations of Israelites as they see a nation seemingly disintegrating before them. Allusions to and citations from Deuteronomy make for the most frequently cited Hebrew Scripture text among all canonical works.

## **Deuteronomy: Bringing the Covenants Together**

*Hear O Israel!  
The Lord is our God, the Lord is One!  
Love the Lord your God with all of your heart  
And with all of your soul  
And with all of your might!*

Deuteronomy 6:4 (NASB)

Bruce Birch writes, “When we take seriously the self-revelation of God in creation, promise, and deliverance, we can then properly understand covenant as a response to what God has already done.”<sup>32</sup> The authors and redactors of the Book of Deuteronomy were well aware of YHWH’s self-revelation. They were very aware of the promises made to Abraham and Sarah and their descendents (19 mentions). They knew of YHWH’s liberation of their forbearers from slavery in Egypt (21 mentions). They remembered the giving of the Law to Moses atop Mt. Sinai (the Decalogue is reiterated and the entire Book of the Covenant is reflected). They remembered and they recorded history as such.

However, the authors and redactors of Deuteronomy also remembered that God had placed covenant requirements upon the nation of Israel. The instruction to Abraham to walk blamelessly and perform righteousness in Genesis 17, and the obligations of the Book of the Covenant shared in the wilderness of Sinai that Israel be faithful are reviewed and restated in the Deuteronomic Code (10:12 for example). Even the

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<sup>32</sup> Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 126.

promises made to David and his descendents are somewhat tapered and tamed. (17:14-20) Deuteronomy is doubly about covenant fulfillment on the one hand, as Israel is poised to cross into the promised land with a host of blessings promised for faithfulness, and about the repercussions inherent in disobedience to the laws given to Moses and the community set aside by YHWH. (Deut. 28)

Deuteronomy begins with the fulfillment of promises to Abraham. "I have set the land before you, go in and take possession of the land I swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to them and their descendents after them." (1:8) "The LORD your God has multiplied you, so that today you are as numerous as the stars of heaven" cries Moses. (1:9) The Deuteronomic historian, working from the vantage point of the post-exilic community<sup>33</sup> that was heavily invested in the covenant promises to the descendents of Abraham and Sarah, was possibly preparing for the time when exile would end and YHWH's faithful would return to reestablish their community. (Deut 30)

"The intention of the whole of this Mosaic vision of a covenant community is to insist that Israel must act out of its distinctive theological identity as YHWH's people..." writes Brueggemann.<sup>34</sup> In the time of exile, it was important for Israelites to remember the covenant promises of the land to be founded in God's grace. Such a reminder inspired the hope of a return to the promised land despite their unfaithfulness. It was also important that Israel remember the mighty acts of the Exodus event as a witness to what God could accomplish on their behalf in the future - exactly that which God had accomplished in Egypt - the liberation of an oppressed peoples who were crying out for

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33 Ottwell, 69.

34 Brueggemann, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 88.

salvation.

The assertion that the land was the property of a deity to give was not an uncommon idea in the ancient Near-East. Most peoples, however, saw the productivity or proper governance of the land tied to “the mood swings of a god exercising arbitrary power.” Israel, though, associated the blessings of occupying the land given to them by YHWH as being closely tied with their own obedience to covenant obligations that invoked the blessings or curses of the deity.<sup>35</sup> Deuteronomy was a document constructed to define what sort of community conduct was appropriate, or commanded, in order to be faithful to the covenant obligations set forth by YHWH at Sinai.<sup>36</sup>

YHWH makes the appropriate response to the Exodus on the part of Israel known in the Decalogue and Book of the Covenant, as stated above. Where the Covenant Code of Exodus is a “commentary” on the Decalogue, however, Deuteronomy goes further. The authors comment not only upon the Ten Commandments, but “upon the entire Exodus Covenant Code as a legal tradition adapted to speak to the changing questions and need of a developing community.”<sup>37</sup> (Deut. 12-26)

Pleins writes, “Deuteronomy frames its theological concerns and social vision in terms of covenant obedience that has strong political overtones.”<sup>38</sup> The text is constant in its reminders, not only of promises of land and descendants, but in recalling the liberation of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. Twenty-one times in the Deuteronomic narrative is the Exodus event mentioned, often during the giving of the Law Code (Chpts.

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35 Dumbrell, 118.

36 Clements, 276.

37 Pleins, 56.

38 *ibid.* 100.

12-26), where Israel is so often exhorted to practice social justice.<sup>39</sup> The issues of commitment to social justice as response to YHWH's liberating act does not find its root in a royal or judicial command. Social justice in Deuteronomy is viewed by the covenant community as a *worshipful response* to YHWH's sovereignty.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the liturgical remembering of promises and mighty acts throughout the text. "Justice for the poor became self-consciously both a civil and religious matter in ancient Israel. As such, the social praxis of justice making comes under scrutiny in the code."<sup>41</sup>

Narratively speaking, the exile event was Israel expelled from the promised land because of covenantal failure. As acknowledged throughout the text, the disobeying of covenant terms is threatened with the possibility of such an expulsion. This is where the Davidic covenant, which shares authorship and editing roots with Deuteronomy, comes together.<sup>42</sup> Deuteronomy, and much of the Hexateuch in general, do not recall the Davidic dynasty in the most glowing terms (See 1 and 2 Kings). Pleins writes that the Decalogue in fact acts to "restrict the role of the earthly monarch and reserve social authority for God." He adds that the Deuteronomic historian formulates within the Ten Commandments a "subtle critique of monarchy and an attempt to limit its authority," and represents "the makings of a formidable program of restriction against an unbridled monarchy."<sup>43</sup> Also, "Whoever the writers are that are responsible for DH," writes Pleins, "They are heavily invested in a recovery of kingship as a useful institution...yet at the

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39 See especially Deuteronomy 15; 17:14-20; 23:15f, 19-20; 24:6, 10-22; 25:13; and 26:12-13.

40 Pleins, 44.

41 *ibid.* 53

42 This statement accepts the notion of the shared community of authorship of Deuteronomy, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings, also known as the Hexateuch.

43 Pleins, 47-48.

same time the institution will no longer be permitted to run roughshod over the concerns of the community.”<sup>44</sup>

Dumbrell believes that Deuteronomy can be viewed as relating in certain terms how life is to be lived in the promised land.<sup>45</sup> The contents of the text take on the form of a “covenant renewal festival.” The acts of YHWH are described in a manner which reiterates that YHWH is Israel’s covenant God. The Law Code of Deuteronomy is not only a commitment to the covenant promises made to the Patriarchs, but a new covenant as well. “Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, all those of us alive here today.”(5:3) Israel accepts the Law Code “as its duty under the agreement, a list of curses and blessings intended to help enforce the covenant and...[Deuteronomy is a text] urging the people to obey the agreement.”<sup>46</sup>

The Law Code of Deuteronomy consists of remembering mutual oaths that YHWH and Israel have made, and are making, in commitment to one another. As such, Israel will enjoy the peculiar blessing and protection of YHWH. “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God, the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.”(7:6) Deuteronomy brings together each promise, embarks on new promises, and lends hope to a people in exile. It also lent hope to the contemporaries of Jesus, the Yahwists of first-century Palestine and throughout the Diaspora. The people of Israel were faithful to a God who they knew would keep the divine promises.

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44 *ibid.* 110.

45 Dumbrell, 116.

46 Otwell, 64.



## EMPIRE, EXILE, AND ISRAEL'S FAITHFULNESS

*O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?  
Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save...  
The law becomes slack and justice never prevails,  
The wicked surround the righteous –  
Therefore judgment comes forth perverted.*

*Look at the nations and see! Be astonished! Be astounded...  
For I am rousing the Chaldeans,  
That fierce and impetuous nation,  
Who march through the breadth of the earth  
To seize dwellings not their own.*

Habakkuk 1:1-6 (NRSV)

For first-century Yahwists, the concepts of national liberation, covenant promises, and the inauguration of the kingdom of God permeated every aspect of their identity. To any observer not afflicted by Israelite nationalist fervor, however, this YHWH God was a failed god. For centuries, the promised land had been dominated by foreigners.

First, the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE, after years of siege under the leadership of Tiglath-pileser III. This effectively put an end to the existence of any distinctive Israelite presence. Shalmaneser V laid siege to Samaria after Hoshea rebelled against his army (2 Kings 15:30), and, "In the ninth year of Hoshea, the King of Assyria...carried the Israelites away to Assyria." (17:6) Sargon II ruled after the reign of Shalmaneser was ended by his death, and claimed the capture, destruction, and deportation of Samaria's citizens for himself.<sup>47</sup> "While Israel had always defined itself in terms of the distinctiveness of its people as a nation, the kingdom...falls to a power whose resettlement policy is designed to weaken the distinctive ethnic and political

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<sup>47</sup> Tammi J. Schneider "Assyria" in *Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible (EDB)* edit. by David N. Freedman (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 123.

identities of conquered nations.”<sup>48</sup> Judah also suffered at the hands of the Assyrians, but maintained a threatened existence by paying tribute that allowed for marginal home rule. (2 Kings 16:7-9)<sup>49</sup>

It would be the Babylonian empire that initiated the continuing cycle of foreign dominance over the nation that would become known after the exile of 587 BCE as Judea. As a renewed Egyptian empire competed with Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylonian empire for control of Palestine, Judah’s king Jehoiakim allied himself with the Egyptians, and Judah suffered under siege by the Babylonian army in 597, after Egypt’s defeat in 605. As a result, Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem in 587, and 2 Kings 25 reports that “a servant of the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem. He burned the house of the LORD, the king’s house, and all the houses of Jerusalem...and carried into exile the rest of the people who were left in the city.” Some fifty years later, Babylonian ruler Cyrus (dubbed God’s anointed in Isaiah 45:1) allows the exiles to return and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple, but Judea would rarely again enjoy self-determination or home rule in the ancient era.

After the return of the exiles in 539 BCE, Judea was dominated by various power entities. Two empires resulted after the death of the Hellenist general Alexander the Great (who conquered much of the Eastern Mediterranean and Persian world circa 332) created a power vacuum in the region. For just over one hundred years, the Ptolemaic Dynasty of Egypt ruled Palestine (301-198 BCE), and then the Seleucids, under the

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48 Stuart Lasine “Israel” in *EDB*, 658.

49 Ahaz’s (r. 735-715) payment of tribute was carried out despite the warnings of Isaiah that the king should remain independent (Isa. 7:3-16)

terrorizing reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (198-167), took control of Jerusalem and infamously desecrated the Temple. (Dan. 11:31, 12:11; 1 Macc. 1:54; Matt 24:15; Mark 13:14)

A brief period of Judean home rule existed after the Maccabean uprising of 167 BCE put an end to Seleucid power in Jerusalem and much of Palestine, though beginning in 164 Judas Maccabeus was involving Rome in the affairs of the Judean state. The Hasmonean regime, an unpopular regime among many Judeans due to their submission to Roman authority and lack of Davidic ancestry, ruled during the year of 63 when civic unrest in the region brought Roman general Pompey to Jerusalem. Pompey took full control of Palestine, though he left the Hasmoneans as client kings in the "City of David." Roman domination was the reality of life for the ensuing generations.

The exilic community, and later, Judean nationalists, had a ready supply of reasons for the fact of Gentile domination in the promised land. The prophetic texts recorded, in no uncertain terms, that the people of Israel - and every bit as much, if not more - the monarchs of Israel, had broken their covenant obligations to YHWH. As promised by the various Scripture texts cited above, and well articulated by Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and others, God's chosen people were suffering at the hands of the pagans because they did not walk an obedient path.

While Deuteronomic texts provide the reasons for which YHWH will punish Israel with exile, the prophetic texts attributed to Isaiah spell out in detail how it has happened. Alongside the explicitly forbidden practice of worshipping foreign gods throughout Israel, Isaiah declares in accordance with the divine herald, "Sons I have

reared up have revolted against me.” (1:2) Festivals and sacrifices have been deemed worthless by God because Israel has failed to provide justice and care to the needy. (1:17, 23) “Your rulers are rebels, and companions of thieves,” reflects the prophet. (1:23) Continued examples from Isaiah provide a witness to the necessity for national repentance. Isaiah remembers Assyria’s military might as an instrument of God in Chapter 10, and promises similar circumstances for Judah. Once again, the failure to provide justice to the poor (10:2), the corruption of the monarchy (10:1), and idolatry (10:11) stand as reasons for Jerusalem’s impending demise.

The prophet Jeremiah is just as concerned with the failing of the monarchy, and of the nation to ensure justice for the marginalized. He places the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian army as the consequence of the wrath of YHWH. “Look, the storm of the LORD! Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest, it will burst upon the head of the wicked.” (Jer. 23:19) Jeremiah condemns the Jerusalem elites:

For scoundrels are found among my people; they take over the goods of others. Like fowlers set a trap; they catch human beings. Like a cage full of birds, their houses are full of treachery; therefore they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy. Shall I not punish them for these things? Says the LORD.<sup>50</sup>

No less compelling, the collection of texts known in the Christian canon as the Minor Prophets place social injustice and the abuses of the monarchy at the forefront of YHWH’s judgment against the nation. These abuses are shown to violate the covenant between God and the Israel, especially the on the part of ruling elites. Hosea, Amos, and Micah are literary products of the eighth century B.C.E., all suggesting that the lack

<sup>50</sup> Jeremiah 5:26-29.

of social justice, along with ever-present idolatry, is the reason behind the imperial threat that existed in the form of the Assyrian army. Hosea brings a “prophetic lawsuit” against Israel, indicting the nation for marital infidelity, equating marriage with covenant relationship.<sup>51</sup> “You have plowed wickedness, and reaped injustice...you have trusted in your power and in the multitude of your warriors” reads 10:13. “Where is your king, that he may save you?” asks YHWH. “I gave you a king in my anger, and I took him away in my wrath.” (13:10-11)

The Book of Amos, written around the time of 725, is equally associated with God’s judgment and the lack of social justice in Israel.

Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals –they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go into the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; then they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed.<sup>52</sup>

The prophet Micah preached in the later eighth century, though much of the book written in his name can be attributed to the exilic period, and has signs of being influenced by the Deuteronomic Historian.<sup>53</sup> Micah is prepared to admonish every institution of Samaria and Jerusalem; the ruling class, the prophetic office, and other economic elites; in confronting them with the fact of their covenant disobedience. Much of Micah has to do with social injustice that is practiced by each institution.

To the economic elites, Micah preaches:

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51 Brueggemann , *Introduction* , 214, 216.

52 Amos 2:6-8.

53 Charles Shaw, “Micah” *EDB*, 894.

Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns they perform it because it is in their power. They covet fields, and seize them...they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance.<sup>54</sup>

For the monarchy, Micah cries out:

Listen you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Should you not know justice? –you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones...They will cry for the LORD but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time, because they have acted wickedly.

Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob...who abhor justice and pervert all equity...its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests for a price, its prophets give oracles for money, yet they lean upon the LORD and say, “surely the LORD is with us”... because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field.<sup>55</sup>

To the false prophets, who are accused of underwriting the machinations of a monarchy out of control, Micah warns, “Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry “Peace” when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing in their mouths...the seers shall be disgraced...for there is no answer from God. (Mic. 2:5, 7)

Yet, in so many texts, including Isaiah and Hosea, there is an ever-present hope of redemption. The prophetic texts make it clear that, while Israel and Judea deserved God’s wrath for their covenant infractions, YHWH was a God faithful to promises, and the fortunes of the Davidic kingdom would be restored to the properly repentant nation.

First-century Judeans could never forget the promises of land and descendents to Abraham that Israel viewed as its collective inheritance. Nor could the collective memory of the Exodus event be minimized, as it acted as the paradigm for Yahwist

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54 Micah 2:1-2.

55 Micah 3:2-12.

hopes of restoration and national glory. It was the relationship to Abraham, the land of Palestine, the blessing of Torah that provided Israel with its covenant identity in the first-century CE. They believed - *they knew* - that YHWH was a faithful God, and that the deity would soon vindicate all of the suffering that the elect had been burdened with. All of these beliefs were reinforced by, more than anything, the stories that had been told through the generations and centuries. Judeans were participants in an epic saga authored by YHWH, and they were anxiously awaiting the next chapter.

First-century Judaism is an excellent example of a culture which quite obviously thrived on stories, which we may divide into two categories: the basic story, told in the Bible, of creation and election, of exodus and monarchy, of exile and return; and smaller unit stories, either dealing with a small part of the larger story, or running parallel to it.<sup>56</sup>

The Yahwists of Palestine understood they were in the midst of this story, and were waiting for the conclusion. From such a narrative, there develops coinciding narrative of hope. It is a hope that appears in various Hebrew writings, and it is this hope that inspired so many Yahwists to revolt against the Roman imperial forces through the first and second centuries.<sup>57</sup> The hope for the “Anointed One” (Χριστός) who would carry out YHWH’s will, meet the covenant obligations of deliverance, and lead Israel toward the restoration the House of David, the promised land, perfect obedience to Torah, and

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56 N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 215.

57 Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews, Wars of the Jews* trans. By William Whiston in *The Works of Josephus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987). The first such revolt happened during 4BCE when Judean protesters, their numbers reinforced by the Passover festival, pulled down Roman standard from the Temple walls and demanded justice for the brutal servants of the now dead Herod. The newly instated Archelaus feared a riot, and directed his army to quell what he feared would turn out of control. According to Jewish historian Josephus, 3000 worshippers were killed, and a large scale revolt ensued. (*Antiquities* 17:9.1; 10.1-2) There were major revolts in 66-70CE (*Wars* 4-5), which saw the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and in 132-135CE, which involves the well known last stand at Masada.

a unified people of God who would rule over the Gentiles. This hope was for the fulfillment of the covenant between YHWH and Israel. It was a hope for a Messiah.

The story of Jesus of Nazareth – and claims about Jesus as Χριστός – is the story of this messianic hope being fulfilled. A faithful Judean was necessary for covenant fulfillment on behalf of Israel – and it was the claim of Jesus’ early followers that he exhibited just such faithfulness. YHWH’s promise of redemption for creation through the promises made to Abraham and Israel had begun to bear fruit in the person of Jesus.

Importantly, the theme of social justice as a means of covenant faithfulness played a major role in first-century Jewish thought, and, as I will show, in the ministry of Jesus. “Divine righteousness, social justice, and ritual purity” writes Dominic Crossan, “Are interwoven like three strands of one and the same rope.”<sup>58</sup> Just as the Deuteronomic historian and the prophets had witnessed to the necessity of caring for the poor, the widowed, and the orphaned, this was a major tenet of the first-century Jewish faith and one of the primary aspects of worshipping the covenant God. Crossan writes:

And how does one know God is just? Because God stood against the Egyptian Empire to save some doomed slaves. God does not simply favor Jews to Egyptians. God does not simply prefer slaves to masters. The only true God prefers justice to injustice, righteousness to unrighteousness, and is therefore God the liberator.<sup>59</sup>

The Davidic covenant is remembered succinctly in literature of the era. The expected Messiah would be in the royal line of David’s seed, victor over the Gentiles and the savior of Israel who would restore Davidic glory. This is reflected in the first-century B.C.E. text known as Psalms of Solomon. These Psalms were explicitly anti-empire in

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58 John D. Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1999), 182.

59 *ibid.*



nature. Robert Wright states that Psalms of Solomon 1,2,8,and 15 “are vivid, apparently eyewitness reactions to the events ...surrounding the Roman occupation of Palestine from the invasion of Pompey in 63 B.C.E. to the rule of Herod the Great in 37 BCE.” Psalms 17 and 18 are explicitly messianic, concerned with the “anointed son of David” expelling pagans and corruption from the temple and from other leadership roles. “Psalms of Solomon call for rebellion against foreign dominance...emboldened by their belief in an imminent divine intervention.”<sup>60</sup>

Other messianic readings in biblical literature, in expectation of the fulfillment of the 2 Samuel covenant, are found among prophetic literature and in the canonical Psalms. Isaiah 7-9, and, of course, Isaiah 11, as well as Jeremiah 23:5-6 and 33:14-17, are interpreted as messianic. Two works which are closely linked together, “First” Zechariah (4:6-10) and Haggai (2:20-23) reflect the messianic hopes of the sixth-century B.C.E., and had an impact on first-century messianic hopes as well.<sup>61</sup>

All of this points toward the belief that “the king of the Jews” would lead Israel, not as a semi-divine god-warrior, but as a flesh and blood military and political leader, who would conquer the enemies of Israel and its God YHWH. These expectations led more than a few Yahwist radicals to claim messianic leadership for themselves. Militant Palestinians such as Judas of Galilee (who led a group in breaking into the armory in Sepphoris), Simon of Perea (who led a mob in burning the royal palace at Jericho), and Athrongeus, “A shepherd who set himself up as king,” are all mentioned by Josephus as

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60 Robert B. Wright, “Psalms of Solomon” in *EDB*, 1241.

61 Howard Kee, *The Beginnings of Christianity: An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: T & T Clark,2005), 28.

men who took the title “king of the Jews” upon themselves.<sup>62</sup>

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62 Josephus, *Wars* 2:41-3

# CHAPTER TWO

## THE HEBREW NARRATIVE AND COVENANT FULFILLMENT **Jesus as Messiah, Faithful Judean, and Savior**

To this point, I have shown that the primary aspect of the relationship between YHWH and Israel is one of covenant. The promises made to Abraham were promises of numerous descendents, land, and that all of creation would be blessed through his faithfulness. At each point in Israel's history, God has renewed covenant, or made new promises, all to the effect that the original promises to Abraham would be remembered.

While YHWH is a God of covenant, the deity of the Israelites is also shown to be one who is mightily concerned with the claims made by various regional empires. The Hebrew narrative suggests that empire makes claims to divinity, omnipotence, and full sovereignty over the fate of humanity. Empire also suggests that it is the ultimate source of provision and security for humanity, and as the Red Sea narrative suggests, even the Hebrews seemed to believe this. Empire, from the time of Assyrian dominance, to the rule of Palestine by the Roman Empire, was a fact of life for Israel.

There is an obvious conflict, if not irony, to the claims of covenantal promises and the reality of the foreign dominance of Judea. The Yahwists of the first century had an answer to this apparent contradiction, mostly made manifest in the hope for divine intervention. Yet, one group of Yahwists made the claim that this tension between promise and reality was resolved in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. They grappled with and grasped at the ancient texts of prior centuries, and contemporary texts of the first century, and insisted that Jesus inaugurated a new reality, over and above the claims of

the empire, and that in the person of Jesus, all of the promises made before had been fulfilled, as Jesus exhibited the faithfulness necessary to fulfill Israel's covenant obligation. Jesus, they claimed, was the Messiah.

The Gospel of Matthew leaves no uncertainty as to which narrative it joins in sharing the story of Jesus. βιβλος γενέσεως, – the “book of beginnings”- recalls the Book of Genesis that marks the beginning of the story of the Creator God. It inserts Jesus of Nazareth right into the thick of the story of God, immediately naming him the χριστος, the expected Messiah who would, as his given name and the author of Matthew imply (1:21), “save his people” from their long period of suffering. “Genesis connotes ‘story’...in the sense of history, of continuing story,” writes Eugene Boring. Yet Matthew's introductory statement also reminds the reader of an important fact. “Jesus [is] the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Matthew's story begins with Abraham, and not yet the birth of Jesus. “The story of Jesus is a continuation and fulfillment of the story of Israel,” (Matt. 1:2-17) which identifies its genesis in the covenant promises to Abraham and David.<sup>63</sup>

The titles attributed to Jesus: the “son of Abraham, the son of David,” are not merely ancestral information. These declarations are significant in that they place Jesus firmly in the context of the promises made to ancient forbearers. Matthew 1:11 even recalls the dark days of exile, showing that YHWH has remembered the descendents of Abraham and Sarah, and has been working continuously, even through the deportation of the sixth-century B.C.E., to reach this point of covenant fulfillment. Yet, Jack Kingsbury

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63 Eugene Boring, “Matthew” *NIB* Vol. VIII, 126.

asks the question: if Matthew states that Jesus is the born of Mary, the husband of Joseph - but is sired by the Spirit of God, how can the Davidic lineage be claimed? The answer, according to Matthew's evangelist, is that Jesus is legitimately the son of David because Joseph adopts him into the line.<sup>64</sup> Warren Carter states that the act of Joseph naming the child (1:25) is an act of Joseph assuming paternity, thus "incorporating him into the lineage."<sup>65</sup>

The Gospel of Luke introduces the story of Jesus differently. The author presents the audience with the priest Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth. These characters and their circumstances bring the covenant stories immediately to mind. Luke 1:6 remembers the covenant obligations of Abraham (Gen. 26:5) and his descendants by suggesting that Zacharias and Elizabeth are "righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord." The Lucan introduction recalls the covenant narratives of Abraham and Sarah, and, through similarities between Luke's Elizabeth and Hannah of 1 Samuel, the story of the beginnings of David. Such similarities include Elizabeth's barrenness in relation to Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Hannah, or the Zacharias' question to the angel (1:18) that mimics Abraham's question in the covenant narrative of Genesis 15, "How will I know?"<sup>66</sup>

Luke 1:30-33 makes clear that the event of Jesus' conception and birth has explicit messianic connotations. The author cites the Davidic covenant and the promise of a never-ending kingdom of Jacob as being fulfilled in Jesus. Luke brings a new

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64 Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 47.

65 Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 72.

66 R. Allen Culpepper, "Luke" *NIB* Vol. IX, 45.

designation to Jesus, however, by stating that he is the “Son of the Most High,” that is, the son of God (Luke 3:38). Such a claim brings us to the second narrative that first-century C.E. Yahwists and followers of Jesus were intricately entwined with, the narrative of Caesar’s empire. As mentioned above, the two narratives clashed at many points, most obviously, over claims of kingship and power.

The messianic claims made by the Gospel authors not only suggest that Jesus will fulfill the expectations of Israel, but that this act of fulfillment will directly conflict with the reality of Caesar and the Roman Empire. For if Jesus as Messiah is the king of the Jews (Matt. 2:2; Mark 1:1; Luke 1:32), that must mean that Caesar - and his client king Herod - are not! Caesar made the claim that it was he who was an offspring of deity, claiming the title “son of God” on coins that bore his image.<sup>67</sup> The virginal conception of Jesus as constructed by Matthew and Luke recall the birth narratives of Caesar Augustus and other heroes of the ancient world. Jesus’ virgin birth story makes the claim of equal status to that generally appropriated to Augustus.

Both Matthew and Luke place the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, birthplace to David, which further substantiates fulfillment of the Davidic covenant and fulfills the prophecy of Micah 5:2.<sup>68</sup> Matthew then relies upon that other important marker of Israelite identity, the Exodus, as Joseph takes wife and child to Egypt just as the sons of Jacob sojourned there. The slaughter of the innocents by Herod certainly remembers vividly the order of Pharaoh that each Hebrew newborn be put to death.

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67 N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 724.

68 Interestingly, Micah 5:2 was not generally cited as a “messianic text” in the first-century but was a witness to the anticipation of the reign of God.

In the midst of these competing narratives is an explicit statement of social justice as a tenet of Jesus' Messiahship. The *Magnificat* not only echoes the promises made to Abraham (Luke 1:55) but speaks to the turning upside-down of injustice by the overthrow of the "rulers from their thrones" (1:52) and the feeding of the hungry at the apparent expense of the rich, who are sent away "empty-handed." "The *Magnificat*," writes Culpepper, "Makes clear the pattern of God's activity. In every line there are echoes of the Scriptures of Israel."<sup>69</sup> The hymn also fits well with the song of Hannah of 1 Samuel 2:1-10. The language of Mary's song of 1:46-52 also lends to one's recollection of the song of Moses and the liberating paradigm of the Exodus event.

Matthew's genealogy makes an interesting statement on the status of wealth and power. Jesus is not deemed significant by wealth, power, or social status, but through his "location in the biblical story."<sup>70</sup> It is important that the birth narrative speaks to the humble circumstances of Jesus' birth and infant life. Yet even in this implicit victory for the marginalized, there is a confrontation with Rome. "By relating Jesus' birth – and the accompanying angelic announcement of 'peace on earth' – to Augustus' decree, Luke is able to subtly proclaim that the true bringer of peace was not Caesar Augustus but Jesus the savior."<sup>71</sup>

"Savior of the world" and "bringer of world peace," or *Pax Romana*, were additionally claims of rulers of the empire. An inscription in ancient Asia Minor celebrated Augustus as the "savior of the whole human race."<sup>72</sup> As Alan Culpepper

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69 Culpepper, 53.

70 Carter, 53.

71 *ibid.* 63

72 Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* trans. By John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 9.

states, "The savior of all people was born under the reign of Augustus...The Messiah was born under Roman oppression...[and] would overthrow the powerful and raise up the oppressed."<sup>73</sup>

### **Remembering the Mighty Arm of YHWH: The Exodus, Crossing the Jordan, and Baptism of Repentance**

Criticism of the empire, and the Temple aristocracy that readily acquiesced to Roman authority, was part of the ongoing renewal movement that sought to restore covenant relationship with God. Jesus did not need to spark enthusiasm in the Yahwists of Palestine - there was a roaring fire of dissidents prepared to commit themselves to the cause of covenant renewal. This is evident in the fact that Jesus, in order to receive his anointing as the Messiah, actively engaged the program of John the Baptist, who spent his time in the wilderness along the banks of the Jordan, conjuring up apocalyptic images of the wrath that was to come. (Matt 3:7; Luke 3:7-9)

John was the self-affirmed "voice of one crying in the wilderness," (Mk 1:3 and par.) and he was also affirmed as such by the crowds of people that came out to the desert to participate in his water-baptism of repentance. Responding to the text of Isaiah 40:3, John may be claiming that he is working in preparation of the coming messiah, but there is another meaning found in his appropriation of the Isaiah text. Taken from the Septuagint, Carter writes that "the text addresses the community exiled in Babylon...the voice [crying in the wilderness] asserts that God will end Babylonian power. God will anoint the Persian ruler Cyrus to overthrow the Babylonians and free

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73 Culpepper, 63.



the exiles. (Is. 45:1)<sup>74</sup>

While this might fit neatly with Wright's claim that Palestinian Yahwists still thought of themselves in exile, it certainly places the context of John's first-century followers into the narrative of exile and restoration of the sixth-century BCE, and jars them into the contemporary expectation for a similar overthrow of Rome. The idea that God would remember and keep the covenant was anchored in the fact that the exiles were returned to the promised land after the fall of the Neo-Babylonians.

John also fulfills the ongoing expectation of the return of the prophet Elijah, whose presence was looked forward to as a sure sign of messianic fulfillment. (Mal. 4:5) John evokes images of Elijah by wearing the same clothing as the ancient prophet (2 Kings 1:8) and by his struggles with the religious and political powers of his day. Elijah's struggles with the Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kings 19) succinctly inform the problems that the Baptist had with Herod, who, according to the ancient historian Josephus, had John executed as a political opponent.<sup>75</sup>

That John was out in the wilderness is further testament to his strained relationship with the Jerusalem elite. His baptism challenged the necessity of the Temple cult (as would Jesus later on). Anyone collecting people in the Jordan wilderness was symbolically saying: This is the new exodus. Anybody offering water-baptism for the forgiveness of sins was saying: you can have, here and now, what you would normally get through the temple cult.<sup>76</sup>

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74 Carter, 94.

75 Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18:5.2. See also Matt. 11:2, 14:1-12; Mark 1:14, 6:16-19; Luke 3:18,9:7-9

76 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press;1996), 160-61.

The wilderness recalls a sense of insignificance of place that is evident in Jesus' association with Bethlehem and Nazareth. It makes the statement that renewal will come from the people, and not Jerusalem. But there is more to the wilderness than the apparent gathering place of the marginalized. Things happen in the wilderness, and people are changed. Wilderness is referenced in Isaiah as a place where "the Spirit is poured out upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fertile field. (Is. 32:15) In the Book of Jeremiah, the wilderness experience of the Hebrews is remembered as a time of grace, the preliminary experience to the promised land, as well as the preliminary experience to a return from exile. (Jer. 31:2,7) Ezekiel 34:23-26a renders the wilderness the place where God "will set over them one shepherd, my servant David... that they may live securely in the wilderness." Primarily, the wilderness activities of John remember the days of preparation that Israel spent in YHWH's care after the Exodus. They were preparing to cross the Jordan river and enter the promised land. And John's baptism was all about Israel's remembering the foundational narrative that was the liberation of the Hebrews and the fulfillment of the promise of land.

The water-baptism is the Yahwists' recreating Israel's escape from bondage, as the Hebrews went into the Red Sea fugitives and arose out of the sea a liberated people. The baptism of John echoed the crossing of the Jordan River into the promised land indicating "an act of liberation from the oppressive political and religious leadership of the time."<sup>77</sup> A further example of the importance of the Exodus narrative in the Jordan River baptisms is the mention of the Hebrew forbearers being "baptized into Moses in

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77 Carter, 95-96.

the cloud and in the sea.” (1 Cor. 10:2) “Paul is suggesting that as a fragmented band of refugees found a new identity in the Exodus...so those who are baptized into Christ thereby find a new identity through their covenant with God.”<sup>78</sup> As for John’s baptism, first-century Palestinians were emerging from the experience newly committed to their covenant identity with YHWH. John was inviting Israel to repent.

Repentance for John, and the people of God, meant a return to covenant righteousness. This thinking parallels such exhortations as those of Moses (Deut. 30:2,10), Isaiah (6:10, 9:13, 31:6), and Jeremiah (2:27, 3:10) for Israel to turn back to YHWH. Repentance in the first-century meant all of Israel committing to the covenant righteousness that would bring YHWH back to dwell among God’s people and restore the glory of David. That folks like John remembered Israel’s covenant obligation does not seem to mean that all of Israel thought obedience was required.

Many Yahwists of the first-century interpreted the Genesis 12 covenant with Abraham as a promise of salvation “regardless of whether they lived by faith and practiced righteousness. Ethnic heritage, apart from righteousness, the Baptist warned, offers no assurance of salvation.”<sup>79</sup> John declares that descendancy from Abraham is not enough to turn away the coming wrath of God. (Matt 3:8-9 and par.) According to John, being born a child of Abraham and Sarah does not ensure a place in God’s covenant, and he seems to be saying that those who fail to walk righteously have separated themselves from the blessing of salvation.

As Jesus comes to John to be baptized, it is fulfilling righteousness that motivates

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78 Laurence Hull Stookey, “Baptism” in *EDB*, 148.

79 Culpepper, 84.

him. (Matt 3:15 and par.) The word δικαιοσύνη, translated righteousness, “refers in Hebrew tradition to actions that are faithful to commitments and relationships. God is righteous or just in that God acts faithfully to covenant commitments.”<sup>80</sup> Δικαιοσύνη, however, is also related to a redemptive action, or making right a wrong deed. As I will show below, as Jesus takes on the ministry of addressing Israel’s messianic hopes, repentance and righteousness for redemption’s sake will be key. As for Jesus’ baptism, it serves as the catalyst for his ministry to begin.

After Jesus is baptized by John, “The heavens were opened to him and he saw the spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon him.” (Matt. 3:16) This is YHWH’s act of anointing with God’s spirit, which also descended upon Gideon (Judges 6:34), Samson (Judges 15:14), Saul (1 Sam. 10:6), and the Davidic king of Isaiah 11:1-6 (specifically verse two). As the spirit descends, God has anointed Jesus as Israel’s long-awaited Messiah, and, as Culpepper states, marks “that the fulfillment of Israel’s eschatological expectations is at hand.”<sup>81</sup> This anointing also sets a tone for the rest of the gospel narrative. Dale and Patricia Miller write, “The basic issue in...Mark is how God’s children should respond [to God’s spirit].”<sup>82</sup> It is Jesus’ response to the anointing event that will set the paradigm for the response of the readers of the gospel narratives after their own baptisms.

Almost all of the narrative issues of this project are covered in the baptism narratives. The covenant with Abraham and the issue of ethnicity, Davidic kingship and

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80 Carter, 102.

81 Culpepper, 90-91.

82 Dale Miller and Patricia Miller, *The Gospel of Mark as Midrash on Earlier Jewish and New Testament Literature*, (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 58.

messiahship, and recollection of the Exodus event are all evident. There is an additional aspect, however, of the story of John that we should not forget. The issue of social justice is addressed clearly in the Lucan Gospel, as the Baptist is questioned by the gathered crowds, including tax collectors and soldiers, about what is necessary to their salvation. (Luke 3:10-14) John's answers to the crowd, the toll collectors and the soldiers, when they ask "What should we do?" give concrete examples of the ethical reforms called for in the previous verses. All three answers call for an end to a lifestyle based on greed and the accumulation of material possessions.<sup>83</sup>

Each of the synoptic Gospels agrees on the events that lead to the messianic actions of Jesus. While Mark declines to engage in the matter of Jesus' birth, the fact of Jesus' place in the ongoing biblical narrative of those claiming kinship with Abraham and Sarah is of primary importance for all three evangelists. Jesus' ministry could not have taken place intelligibly without the understanding that he was acting within an ongoing story of the history of creation. The claim of the Gospels is not that Jesus is a participant in a philosophical venture more akin to Hellenistic thought than the ancient Hebrew narrative. The evangelists make clear from the outset that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel who is acting on behalf of *Israel's* God, and that this will have a major impact on the way Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome experience the world.

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83 Culpepper, 84.

## Destroying the Temple

*And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling  
And those who were buying in the temple,  
And he overturned the tables of the money changers,  
And the seats of those who sold doves,  
And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.  
He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written?  
My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'?  
But you have made it a den of robbers."*

Mark 11: 15b-17 (NRSV)

Much has been made of Jesus' action at the Temple (Matt. 21:12-13 and par.), and the phrase "*Jesus cleanses the Temple*" has certainly made its mark as a subject header in many a Bible.<sup>84</sup> However, much of recent scholarship agrees that Jesus' action at the Temple is not a cleansing (i.e. Judas Maccabeus 1 Mac.4:36-59), but is in fact a symbolic *destruction* of the Temple. "Mark himself knows that Jesus was not purifying but symbolically destroying the temple because he carefully framed his action with the fruitless fig tree's cursing in 11:12-14 and the withering in 11:20. As the useless fig tree was destroyed, so symbolically was the useless temple."<sup>85</sup>

While Wright suggests that the Temple was a major symbol of Palestinian Judaism - the central symbol - it was certainly not without critics. The Essenes patiently awaited the destruction of the Herodian Temple so that YHWH might build a new one. Centuries before, Jeremiah promised that if Israel did not repent of its injustice and idolatry (Jer. 7:1-15), the Temple would be destroyed because the covenant obligations had not been

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<sup>84</sup> Just as an example, The NRSV, NASB, KJV all use this heading. Interestingly, the NJB uses the heading "the expulsion of the dealers from the Temple" though the footnote cannot help but suggest the action is "the messianic event of cleansing the temple." *The New Jerusalem Bible* (New York: Doubleday; 1985). 1645n.c

<sup>85</sup> John D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 352.

upheld. That the Temple was home to the Hasmonean regime, which was not of Davidic descent, and that there were sacrifices made to the emperor of Rome, added to the shakiness of the foundation upon which the Temple reserved a certain amount of reverence. Also, the Temple served as more than simply a religious symbol, it served as a testament to the authority of the Jerusalem elites. (Remember the motives attributed to David mentioned above.)

The Temple had become, if it was not always the case, a commodity for the political authority of Judaism. It came to represent the political and religious elite, and their socio-economic agenda, as the legitimate expression of YHWH as opposed to covenant. The Temple existed, Henri Mottu writes, as “a fixed preconception that stands opposed to what is actually present.”<sup>86</sup> It was this preconception that Jesus was acting against. A Temple opposed to the reality of covenant.

Ched Myers writes that “The Temple was *fundamentally* an economic institution... and it dominated the city’s commercial life...It is *the ruling class interests* in the temple market that Jesus is attacking.”<sup>87</sup> By attacking the banking and commercial aspects of the Temple, Jesus is also attacking the class system reinforced by the trading and taxation practices of the Temple cult. George Pixley writes that “The economic base of the temple’s domination was challenged by Jesus and his movement.”<sup>88</sup> Jesus challenged the Temple authorities because of the way the poor and unclean are exploited by purity

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86 Henri Mottu, “Jeremiah vs. Hananiah: Ideology and Truth in Old Testament Prophecy” in Norman K. Gottwald, ed. *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, (Maryknoll; Orbis Books, 1983), 243.

87 Ched Myers, *Binding the Strongman: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 300.

88 George Pixley, “God’s Kingdom in First-Century Palestine: The Strategy of Jesus” in Gottwald, *Bible and Liberation*, 386.

codes and monetary obligations. Along with the quote from Jeremiah 7, his actions mirror the words of Hosea 9:15: “Because of the wickedness of their deeds, I will drive them out of my house...all their officials are rebels.”

Jesus calls for an end to the entire cultic system...that doubly exploited the poor and unclean. Not only were they considered second-class citizens, but the cult obligated them to make reparation – through sacrifices – for their inferior status – from which marketers profited. Jesus’ action here...[is a] direct action campaign to discredit the socio-symbolic apparatus that discriminated against the “weak” and “sinners.”<sup>89</sup>

As mentioned above, the fact that sacrifices were offered for Caesar as well as those called for by Torah, simply acted as a reminder to faithful Yahwists that they were a subjected people under imperial rule. However, to end such sacrifices would be deemed an act of rebellion against Rome. And it is not at all apparent that an end to the sacrificial system would have been welcomed by all Yahwists. First-century Judeans might have regarded the suggested cessation of Temple sacrifices as appalling. Yet Jesus, according to Wright, is suggesting this very notion. “Jesus action symbolized his belief that, in returning to Zion, YHWH would not take up residence in the Temple.” Such an act by Israel’s God, states Wright, would have legitimized a corrupt Temple administration.<sup>90</sup> The question is raised concerning the high-priesthood being mandated by Torah. How could Jesus act against such a mandate?

Richard Horsley writes, “The high priesthood was instituted by Torah, but a gulf had developed between the legitimating ideals of Torah and the actions of the actual high priests and their practices in the Temple.”<sup>91</sup> Also, it should be remembered that the

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89 Myers, 301.

90 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 423.

91 Richard Horsley *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 288.



Temple is not a part of the covenant agreement between YHWH and Israel, at any point. It plays no role in the covenant between God and David, and while YHWH says that David's son will build it, God resists the notion that any structure other than "a tent and a tabernacle" (2 Sam. 7:6b) are necessary for *Shekinah*. There is simply no covenant obligation on behalf of YHWH to dwell in the Temple. There is plenty of promise that God will return to Zion and revisit the Temple, but followers of Jesus would say this event was played out when Jesus travelled to Jerusalem.

Jesus symbolically and prophetically enacted judgment on the Temple, a central national symbol. He claimed that the Temple was existing under the threat of YHWH's wrath, which would be realized with its destruction by pagan forces. Jesus went a step further than the prediction made by Jeremiah that God would bring down the Temple. He claimed not only the status of prophet, but the status of the *true king*, over and against the Hasmoneans and Herod, who had constructed the magnificent edifice.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, Jesus goes to the lengths of accusing the Temple authorities of breeding nationalist violence.

In using the Greek word ληστής - or "robbers" - the Gospel authors are attributing to Jesus a word that was used to describe revolutionaries such as Barabbas (Luke 23:18), and the two men crucified with Jesus. When Jesus is remembered as quoting Jeremiah in proclaiming that the Temple had been made into a robbers den, he was saying that the national investment in a non-covenant entity such as the Temple simply portended the national demeanor that expected YHWH would act on behalf of Israel and defend

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92 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 417.

her against enemies.<sup>93</sup> The corruption of the Temple would lead to a national violence that would bring the wrath of Rome upon the Jerusalem edifice, and all of Israel's national hopes would be toppled along with the walls of the shrine.

Horsely states that faithful Yahwists had a ready made answer to the problems of the Temple.

It is surely also important to recognize that the Temple-state was not the only modes in the Jewish cultural tradition for the organizing of their existence as a people. The Torah provided an alternative model in the Exodus and covenant on Sinai, with Mosaic-prophetic instead of high priestly leadership. Indeed, the historical model of the Exodus-covenant stood in considerable tension with the Temple system.<sup>94</sup>

Horsely looks to Isaiah as a paradigm for Jewish eschatological hopes and the Temple. In "Third" Isaiah (56-66) the dominant concern is for the restoration of the people's life in "peace and welfare on their land." Any sense of future glorification of the Temple appears only briefly in 44:28 in response to the messiahship of Cyrus, and in Chapter 60. Isaiah 66:1-6, however, is a sharp condemnation of sacrifices and offering.<sup>95</sup>

To pull all of this together, Jesus was not cleansing the Temple for YHWH's future residency. Jesus was enacting YHWH's return to the Temple, and symbolically destroying it in response to the corruption and injustice that resulted from the policies of exploitive authorities. While it may have been unsettling to some Judeans, the idea that the Temple could be destroyed was well versed in the later Hebrew narrative (i.e. Jer. 26:4-6). Also, Jesus would have claimed that the Temple played no significant role in the covenantal relationship that YHWH had with God's people. That the destruction could

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93 *ibid.* 420.

94 Horsley, 288.

95 *ibid.* 289.

mean the permanent demise of this national symbol was a commentary on the ongoing militarism and nationalism on behalf of Israel. It is such militarism that finally brought the armies of the empire to Jerusalem to fulfill Jesus' prophetic warnings. In the end, however, it was not Jesus' interpretation of Torah, nor his messianic assumptions that brought others to seek his destruction. He was deemed a threat to the Temple, and to the establishment of Rome and its clientele of the Judean aristocracy, which led to his execution as a political criminal. Jesus' final week in Jerusalem is full of covenant metaphor and messianic action. It is this week that I turn to presently.

## Jesus in Jerusalem

*Hosanna!*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*

*Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!*

*Hosanna in the highest heaven!*

Mark 11:9b-10 (NRSV)

To begin the study of Jesus' actions in Jerusalem during the Passover of 30 C.E., we must go back before the Temple action to the "triumphal" entry into the Holy City that marked the beginning of the culmination of Jesus' messianic efforts. It also marks the culmination of his hostilities with the Jerusalem elites. There are two significant aspects of Jesus' arrival at Jerusalem. One, of course, is that the action is undertaken as a role-play/fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9, which foretells of the triumphant return of the king to Jerusalem: "Lo your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, on the foal of a donkey."

Another aspect of Jesus arrival is that it stood clearly in contrast with another

procession that would be taking place preceding the Passover festival. Marcus Borg and John Crossan recall the statement of George Caird that the triumphal entry “looks like a planned political demonstration.”<sup>96</sup> For at a different gate into the city, Pontius Pilate would be entering Jerusalem to oversee the events of Passover. Pilate would enter as the representative of the Caesar, accompanied by the awe-inspiring trappings of the empire. “Calvary on horses, foot-soldiers, weapons, banners, golden eagles...Pilate’s procession displayed not only imperial power, but also imperial Roman theology.”<sup>97</sup> Borg and Crossan write that “Jesus’ procession deliberately countered what was happening [in Pilate’s procession]. Pilate’s embodied the power, glory and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus’...embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God.”

Writes Culpepper, “Entrance processions were a familiar ceremony in the first-century. Numerous kings and conquering generals had entered Jerusalem over the years.”<sup>98</sup> Myers, however, does not feel that the “triumphal entry” moniker is suitable for the event that actually transpired. He refers to it as a “symbolic procession” and proposes that Jesus and his followers were participating in a first-century version of “political street theater.”<sup>99</sup> Jesus is entering Jerusalem with every intention of both claiming his Davidic kingship as foretold in Zechariah 9:9, and lampooning the powers that be who have come and gone through the Holy City representing the kind of power that exists in tension with YHWH’s kingdom.

Another instance of Jesus working with competing narratives is found in the

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96 Marcus Borg and John D. Crossan, *The Last Week: The Day to Day Account of Jesus’ Final Week in Jerusalem*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2006), 4.

97 *ibid.*

98 Culpepper, 366.

99 Myers, 294.

Parable of the Tenants which exists in all three synoptic reports of his ministry during Holy Week. (Mark 12:12 and pars.) In the Marcan rendition of this story, Jesus infuriates the Pharisees and Scribes by telling of a vineyard owner who places his land in the care of some tenants. When the tenants refused to yield the produce of the vineyard to each agent sent by the owner to collect, he sends his son thinking the tenants will respect his heir. The workers, according to the parable, kill the son of the owner in hope of gaining the inheritance for themselves. Of course, the vineyard owner came and executed the tenants, and replaced them with a more favorable group. When the author of Mark tells this story, it seems rather obvious that there is a connection between this generation of Pharisees and Scribes (the tenants) and Jerusalem's history of ill-treating the prophets sent by YHWH (slaves) to remind them of covenant obligations. Jesus' opponents see the story as an attack on themselves, and they wanted Jesus arrested. This has been the straightforward interpretation of this parable.<sup>100</sup>

However, the setting and circumstances for the parable changes in Matthew and Luke. The author of Matthew draws upon the socio-economic conditions of Palestine in order to make a double point. Family land was being lost to debt throughout the region of Palestine, and absentee landlords were becoming the standard. The landlord simply hired the peasants who had originally owned the land to continue to work it, and then collected the profits for himself. The term "inheritance," of course, is a catch phrase for those identifying themselves as descendents of Abraham and Sarah, and indeed first-century Yahwists viewed the absentee landlords as controlling the land that was

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100 PHEME PERKINS, "Mark" *NIB* Vol. VIII, 670-71.

promised to themselves by God. As in the parable, many first-century Jews believed in the use of violence to reclaim the inheritance.

The author of Matthew, when remembering that Jesus is telling this parable to the Pharisees (21:33-42), is identifying Jesus' opponents as not only rejecting the prophets of YHWH, but they are in fact siding with the Jerusalem elite that has been confiscating Israel's inheritance for themselves. For when Jesus asks what the owner might do to the tenants, the opponents reply that the owner "will put those *wretches to a miserable death*, and lease the vineyard to other tenants." Thus Jesus exposes the Pharisees' loyalty to the Jerusalem elite. In Luke, however, there is an even stronger lesson for those whom Jesus is instructing.

Luke has Jesus telling the parable to the "people" with the Pharisees simply acting as onlookers. The parable is told the same way as it is in Mark and Matthew, but with yet another ending. When Jesus asks the people what will happen when the owner comes, he answers that the tenants will be destroyed. The people respond to Jesus saying "Heaven forbid," understanding that if they as peasants do indeed pursue violence to claim the inheritance, there will be no opportunity for them to enjoy the fruits of their rebellion, because their violence will be met with even more viciousness. Thus, Jesus not only criticizes the use of violence as a means to justice, but makes clear that violence will lead to the total loss of the land so dear to Israelites.<sup>101</sup>

Wright states that much of Jesus' thrust concerning the land as inheritance, and in terms of covenant promises, considers the issue of land problematic in Israel's

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101 For a brief study of many of Jesus' parables, including the parable of the tenants, please visit [www.concentric.net/~Mattison/Jesus](http://www.concentric.net/~Mattison/Jesus)

relationship with YHWH. As shown above concerning the Temple action, Jesus' time in Jerusalem was spent challenging traditional Yahwist views of covenant promises. Firmly held views that the regaining of the inheritance promised to Israel was the priority of Yahwists throughout Palestine, as I stated above, were directly challenged by Jesus. It was the contention of Jesus that the kingdom of God could by no means be ushered in through the use of violence. If Israel was intent on grasping onto the machinations of militarism in order to reclaim the land, not only would it fail, but Israel would experience the full wrath of YHWH at the hands of the very pagans they so hated.

“Jesus denounced, as no better than the pagans, not only those who compromised with Caesar by playing his power-games [Jerusalem's elite], *but also those who compromised with him by thinking to defeat him with his own weapons.*”<sup>102</sup> Jesus as Messiah was refusing to be the military leader Israel had expected. He called not for Israel's fully realized return to national glory through God's restoration of inheritance, but that Israel would return to Davidic glory “by making Israel what she was called to be, namely, the light of the world.”<sup>103</sup> In Jesus' view, Israel had turned toward the idolatry of valuing the promise of land more than they valued the covenant obligation of reflecting God's love for all the nations. Just as YHWH had returned to the Temple and cast judgment upon it through the actions of Jesus (so Jesus intended), YHWH had returned to Zion and cast judgment upon God's people. If Israel continued to use militarism in hopes of achieving self-determination, they would suffer God's wrath. Israel was failing its covenant obligation.

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102 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 594-95, *italics original*.

103 *ibid.* 595.

Jesus claims the authority to proclaim judgment by claiming his own superiority over King David. (Luke 20:41-44 and par.) He presents a riddle to his challengers concerning the status of the “son of David” as it relates to the expected messiah.

Son of David is a messianic category...not a biological one. Some of Jesus’ contemporaries expected the Messiah would be Son of David in the sense of being a king like David – a warrior who presided over Israel in the time of its great power and glory...The message here then is that the Messiah will not be a king like David...rather, the Messiah will be the kind of king symbolized by [Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem by way of a donkey].<sup>104</sup>

Thus, Jesus not only has laid claim to the son of David title, “savior of Israel,” but also the role of Lord of David, who fulfills covenant commitments to the salvation of the nations.<sup>105</sup> Simply by posing the question concerning David’s identification of the Messiah as “Lord” in Psalm 110, “Jesus implies that he has gained his authority...not merely as David’s son, but more particularly, as David’s Lord.”<sup>106</sup>

Another issue that Jesus addresses during his Passover week activities in Jerusalem is that of Torah. In Matthew (22:34-40) Jesus is confronted by Pharisees and questioned about what the greatest commandment might be. While the Decalogue easily comes to mind for most, Jesus cites Deuteronomy 6:4 and paraphrases the *Shema*, which reads “Listen Israel: Yahweh our God is one, the only Yahweh. You must love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength.” (NJB) This answer might not have surprised anyone, and neither should the second part of Jesus’ response. He invokes Leviticus 19:18 and exhorts the Pharisees to “love your neighbor as yourself.” The author of Matthew then attributes to Jesus the statement, “On these two

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104 Borg and Crossan, 71.

105 Culpepper, 391.

106 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 509.



commandments depend the whole Law and Prophets” (22:40)

The author of Mark also proposes that Jesus’ answer concerning the greatest commandment is not controversial, by placing a Scribe in the rare position of finding agreement with Jesus. The Nazarene responds that the Scribe is “not far from the kingdom of heaven” (12:34) due to his concurrence with Jesus’ answer. Concerning Jesus’ use of Leviticus 19:18, it is not simply a proof text. The whole of Leviticus 19 requires Israelites to engage in just human relationships, provide food for the poor, to refrain from taking unfair advantage of others, and disavowing vengeance. Jesus, by referring to the text, is proclaiming the importance of social justice and equitable relationships for the faithfulness of Israel to be complete. Carter believes that Jesus’ reference to Leviticus 19 suggests his charge that “the religious leaders have failed to create the type of society” called for in the pericope.<sup>107</sup>

In Luke, the question and answer sequence with the Jerusalem opposition does not take place in the Holy City, but in Galilee, where a “lawyer” puts Jesus to the test. Jesus is still remembered as giving the same answer, but is further challenged by his opponent to define who is a neighbor. Jesus’ response is a direct challenge, not only to Israel’s perceived covenant shortcomings, but to the status they attribute to their claim of descendancy from Abraham and Sarah. He tells the parable of the good Samaritan, found only in the Gospel of Luke. (10:30-37)

This story encompasses a plot in which the characters of the priest and the Levite pass by a seriously injured man (“half dead”) without offering any assistance to him. The

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107 Carter, 445.

third passerby in the story would have been fully expected by the listener to be another Israelite, but Jesus betrays all expectations by bringing into the story the character of the Samaritan. Faithful Galileans and Judeans would absolutely refuse to talk with Samaritans, attributing inferior status to their neighboring community due to their “questionable” bloodline resulting from intermarriage of northern kingdom Israelites with Assyrian conquerors. In Jesus’ parable, it is the Samaritan who helps the half-dead traveler and promises to further provide for his care.

The parable of the good Samaritan attacks the “stereotypes of social boundaries and class division and renders void any system or religious *quid pro quo*. By depicting a Samaritan as the hero of the story...Jesus demolished all boundary expectations. Social position, race, religion...all count for nothing.”<sup>108</sup> Presently, however, it is time to return to Jerusalem and Passover week.

All three synoptic Gospels portray Jesus as giving notice to his disciples and all Yahwists. If they continue along the path of violence, the Day of YHWH will not be an understated event in Jerusalem. Chapter 13 of the Gospel of Mark, and its synoptic parallels, are straightforward examples of Jewish apocalyptic literature. (Mark 13 is known as “the little apocalypse”) However, Wright states “The Gospel subverts the normal Jewish apocalyptic telling of Israel’s story...Jerusalem is a great city that has opposed the true people of Israel’s god; like Babylon, this city will fall as the sign of liberation of the true people.”<sup>109</sup> This means certain destruction for Jerusalem, and “vindication” of Jesus’ religious and political agenda. In looking at the apocalyptic

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108 Culpepper, 329-30.

109 Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 393.

statements attributed to Jesus, I will limit the study to Mark due to the common (yet much debated) dating of the text as literature written prior to the destruction of the Temple.<sup>110</sup>

It may do well to state up front that the eschatology of Mark 13 is certainly anchored in Jesus' belief that Jerusalem was heading toward destruction. Yet, when he speaks of the terrible events that lay ahead for believers, neither Jesus nor the author of Mark is engaging in prophecy meant to describe events attributable to modern expectations of some end-time "tribulation." Jesus' prophetic voice is concretely grounded in the events of first-century Palestine, and prepares the disciples for the chaos that will certainly follow Israel's insistence on militaristic responses to the evil of Roman occupation. Writes Horsley, "The synoptic Gospel traditions developed during decades of extensive popular discontent, periodic protests, numerous resistance and renewal movements, and recurrent oppression by Roman military action."

When the author of Mark remembers Jesus' warnings concerning the Temple and Jerusalem, it is doubtless that the prophetic words would have resonated with any contemporary Yahwist. The double narrative is expressed throughout the apocalyptic pericope.

"See to it that no one misleads you...when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be frightened, those things must take place." (13:5-7 NASB) When Mark remembers Jesus speaking to disciples concerning "wars and rumors of wars," he is rooted in contemporary events. Within a decade of Jesus death, several wars raged

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110 Richard Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001), 131; see also Perkins, 517, who states that a minority of scholars date Mark at around 62-64 CE.

through the Middle East and Palestine in particular. Herod Antipas in Galilee fought against Perea, and Roman troops joined the battle. Roman governors “regularly” sent out troops to “suppress popular movements...sometimes destroying whole villages as well as slaughtering people.”<sup>111</sup> In response, as stated above, there were many a Yahwist prepared to strike back at the empire.

The message of Mark 13:9-13 implicitly recalls the suffering of Jesus’ earliest followers. Disciples and church leaders were brought before the Sanhedrin and flogged. (Acts 4:5-7, 5:40, 6:11-15) Indeed, the apostle Paul was preaching the “good news to all the nations,” and by the time of Mark’s writing, Peter and Paul (I Clement 4:11-14), James brother of John (Acts 12:2), and James the Just (*Antiquities* 20:9.1) had all been martyred for ministry in Jesus’ name.<sup>112</sup> The martyr Stephen’s spirit-driven sermon to his oppressors (Acts 7) is recalled as well.

The reference to the Abomination of Desolation (13:14) is steeped in the double narrative Jerusalem and Rome. The phrase instantly recalls the actions of Antiochus Epiphanes, who had a pagan altar built in the Temple and imposed sacrifices to the deity Zeus Olympios.<sup>113</sup> This undertaking stirred the always simmering militancy of Palestinian Yahwists. (I Macc.1:54ff) Yet there is an unmistakable reference to contemporary acts of Temple desecration as well. Horsley writes that the crisis of 39-40 C.E. is recalled, when Emperor Gaius ordered a statue of himself placed in the Temple. “This is almost certainly the event that would have evoked memories of and allusions to the ‘desolating

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111 Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 131-32.

112 “First Epistle of Clement to Corinthians” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325* Vol. I, ed., Roberts, Alexander, and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans; 1981); Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities*.

113 Earnest Kevan, “Abomination of Desolation” in *EDB*, 15.

sacrilege” found in I Maccabees, and Daniel 9:27, 11:31, and 12:11

Also, there were constant famines (Mk 13:8) during the first-century in Palestine. Not only due to drought, but food was scarce throughout Palestine because of the agricultural strikes undertaken by Yahwists in response to the statue in the Temple fiasco, and ongoing banditry in the region. Horsley states that famine was a major contributor to the revolt of 66-70.<sup>114</sup> The general warning about false messiahs and prophets issued to the early Church is reference to the series of political and military insurrectionists that are mentioned above. Jesus is remembered as instructing the fledgling Church to “flee to the mountains” (13:14) when the violence breaks out in Jerusalem, and not succumb to the exhortations to militarism that would be directed toward the faithful when crisis broke out.

Gospel recollections of that Passover week are intended to paint two portraits of Jesus. On the one hand, the authors reestablish Jesus’ messiahship and drive home the claim that through his messianic actions, Israel’s covenant expectations are fulfilled. On the other hand, the Gospel authors tell stories that bring forth the unwelcome assertion of Jesus that such fulfillment was not going to be what Israel expected and hoped for. While Jesus is solidly working within the context of the ongoing narrative of Israel’s covenant relationship with YHWH, there is significant traditioning taking place within the narrative that suggests Jesus believed YHWH was acting in history through him to fulfill the purposes that God had in mind for Israel all along. Jesus’ ministry speaks specifically to the narrative mainstays of covenant promises and obligations, the Exodus event,

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114 Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 132-33.

social justice, and election.

As I will now show, Jesus and the early church believed that through the faithfulness that Jesus exhibited toward YHWH during his life and ministry, Israel was finally brought into right relationship with God, as was the rest of the world. Those Yahwists who rejected this fulfillment in favor of continued militarism and isolation, would unfortunately suffer the consequences of such violence and injustice. Indeed, the rejection of Jesus' new way of life is evident in the response of both Rome and the Jerusalem elites through his execution. It is also apparent when Judas betrays Jesus, possibly as he realizes that Jesus wants Israel to forego its inheritance in order to remain faithful to its covenant with YHWH. Judas could only understand violence, and insisted upon such a response to evil as the call of Israel.<sup>115</sup>

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115 Oscar Cullman , *The State and the New Testament*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), 15.

# Chapter Three

## The Last Supper: A Claim of Covenant Fulfillment

*Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he gave thanks  
He broke it and gave it to them, saying,  
"This is my body, which is given for you.  
Do this in remembrance of me."  
And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying,  
This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."  
Luke 22:19-20*

Much ink has been spilled over the issue of whether the Last Supper was indeed a Passover meal or not, and the biblical witness seems confused on the issue. Though Matthew, Mark and Luke all say explicitly that the banquet was indeed a Passover meal, the Gospel of John and the Babylonian Talmud (43a) report that Jesus was executed on the day before the Passover feast. At any rate, Wright proposes that regardless of when the actual meal took place, evidence points to the probability it was “*some kind of Passover meal*” and Josephus reports a precedent for the meal being celebrated by a fraternal group as opposed to a family unit.<sup>116</sup>

There are several points of the Last Supper narrative that speak directly toward covenant fulfillment. Pheme Perkins sees the narrative as the fulfillment of prophecy found in Zechariah.

The apocalyptic section of Zechariah 9-14 provides the symbolism for a number of details in the passion. Zechariah 14:4 asserts that when Yahweh comes to defeat Israel’s enemies, Yahweh will stand on the Mount of Olives: Jesus’ destination after the supper is the Mount of Olives. In Zechariah 9:11, Yahweh speaks to the daughter of Zion/Jerusalem, promising to liberate her captives by the “blood of your covenant.” The existence of the covenant between Yahweh

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116 Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 555; Josephus, *Wars*, 6:9.3.

and Israel grounds the promise of eschatological liberation in Zechariah. In Mark, Jesus' blood establishes a "new covenant" which is the basis for the experience of salvation.<sup>117</sup>

Just as explicit is the Last Supper's resonance with the narrative of Exodus and Davidic covenant. Church literature "make(s) it clear that [Eucharist] was, like baptism, associated directly with the Jewish background of Passover, Exodus, and the Davidic kingdom...It thus tied the life of early Christianity very firmly to the historical life of Israel."<sup>118</sup> What had always been remembered as the celebration of YHWH's deliverance of the Hebrew slaves is used by Jesus to point toward "the fulfillment of God's redemptive work in the kingdom." Culpepper writes, "Just as the Passover was observed 'so that all the days of your life you may remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt' (Deut. 16:3), so also the Lord's Supper would be observed 'in remembrance of me (Jesus).'"<sup>119</sup>

For many, indeed most scholars and nearly all lay believers, the Last Supper points toward the fulfillment of covenant obligations to YHWH by identifying Jesus as the Passover lamb that will be *sacrificed* for the sins of humanity. The Passover meal is identified as an integral step toward the cross, as Jesus' death is interpreted as an atoning event. Jesus is thought to suggest as much with the statements concerning his body, the blood of the covenant, and his impending death. It is my contention, however, that the Last Supper is not held in preparation for the execution of Jesus (though his death may have been fully expected), but is instead a *celebration* of Jesus' inauguration of the kingdom of God as it is realized through his ministry and messianic actions. The

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117 Perkins, 704.

118 Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 447-48.

119 Culpepper, 419.



Last Supper *celebrates the fulfillment of Israel's covenant obligations through the work of Jesus, and the continuing work of those who affirm him as Messiah.*

First, I will address the issue of Jesus as a Paschal lamb. Borg and Crossan write, "In this context, the Passover lamb had two primary meanings." First, the blood of the Passover lamb was sprinkled on the doorposts of Hebrew slaves so that the Angel of Death would "pass over" their homes and not kill their first born – the fate that awaited the Egyptians. (Ex. 12:7,23) Second, the lamb was food for the ensuing journey out of Egypt. It was the "last supper" in bondage. "We note that the Passover lamb is a sacrifice in the broad sense of the word, but not in the narrow sense of substitutionary sacrifice. Its purpose is twofold: protection against death and food for the journey. The story [of Passover] makes no mention of sin, guilt, substitution or atonement."<sup>120</sup>

We should associate the Last Supper with Jesus' Messianic intentions. Fredriksen writes that the "idea of a communal banquet celebrating the arrival of the kingdom of God" existed in first-century Judaism. The Quran community looked forward to just such a banquet upon the arrival of YHWH, that would be presided over by the priest and the messiah. (1QSa 2:17-22)<sup>121</sup> Fredriksen does not, however, attribute the intention of an *atonement* death to Jesus. "Jesus logia in both Paul and Mark connect his coming death to the coming kingdom. But still – in neither does Jesus say something like 'this is my blood which is poured out for *the expiation of the sins of many.*' So whence the idea of an *atonement* sacrifice?"<sup>122</sup>

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120 Borg and Crossan, 116-17.

121 Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 115; Geza Vermes, trans. *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 158.

122 Fredriksen, 116, *italics original*.

Yet, if salvation is not achieved through Jesus' sacrificial death, how is it achieved? Jesus' may have contended that it was his faithfulness to YHWH that satisfied Israel's covenant obligations. "One can hardly imagine that Jesus both willed and sought after his death as the sole possible way of realizing the kingdom of God...That death only comes in prospect as the result of his preaching and mode of life."<sup>123</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx maintains the Last Supper is significant in its celebration of Jesus' life.

Although it is a separate tradition, we must not see the Last Supper as wholly detached from the many instances during Jesus' earthly life when he had made the offer of salvation through the shared meal of fellowship. To put it another way: the Last Supper is itself already set within the broader context of the *life* of Jesus, by whom salvation is imparted by God is tendered under the sign of the fellowship meal.<sup>124</sup>

Jesus action of passing the cup at the Last Supper continues to offer this saving fellowship between he and his disciples "in spite of" his approaching death. But more is suggested than mere fellowship with Jesus. "The *coming of God's rule* remains linked to fellowship with Jesus." Schillebeeckx states that there is in fact "no certain logion of Jesus... in which Jesus himself might be thought to ascribe a salvific import to his death."<sup>125</sup> Again, in finding covenant obedience in Jesus messianic actions, Schillebeeckx emphasizes life and ministry.

The entire ministry of Jesus during the period of his public life was not just an assurance or promise of salvation but a concrete tender of salvation then and there. He does not just talk about God and his [*sic*] rule; where he appears he brings salvation...The active acceptance of his death and rejection can only be understood as Jesus' active incorporation of death into his mission of offering salvation...Jesus' whole life is the hermeneusis of his death.<sup>126</sup>

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123 Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 306.

124 *ibid.* 307-08.

125 *ibid.* 311, *italics added.*

126 *ibid.* 311.

Gospel support for a narrative that assumes that it is the *life* of Jesus that is salvific is shown above, yet such a narrative is supported in the earlier tradition that is found in the authentic Pauline epistles as well. This is especially evident in passages such as Galatians 2:16 and 3:22, Romans 3:21-22, and 26, and Philippians 3:9. Each passage exists in the context of Paul sharing his thoughts on the overarching narrative of God's covenant promises to Abraham, David, and Israel

## **The Faith of Jesus Christ and the Non-violent Atonement**

*Exuberant writing calls for exuberant exegesis:  
Not, of course, uncontrolled or fanciful exegesis,  
but an exegesis which pays attention to the proper controls,  
which are neither narrow lexicography nor philology,  
but under the wider rules of narrative discourse.<sup>127</sup>*

*But now apart from the law,  
The righteousness of God has been disclosed,  
And is attested by the law and prophets, the righteousness of God  
Through the faith "of" Jesus Christ for all who believe...  
It was to prove at the present time  
That he himself is righteous and that he justifies  
The one who has the faith "of" Jesus  
Romans 3:21-22, 26*

In the Galatians text, the Apostle Paul is writing of his presence at the "Council at Jerusalem," where the matter of Gentile adherence to Jewish distinctives is being discussed. After accusing Peter and Barnabas of hypocrisy for their relationships with Gentiles in the company of fellow Judeans, Paul launches into the prototypical polemic of justification in light of Jesus' ministry. He insists that Jewish practices such as Torah adherence or circumcision are no longer the identifying marks of God's people. God's

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127 N.T. Wright, *Paul*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 46.

people, according to Paul, are now known by their faith alone, and as the whole of the epistle is concerned with, it is not at all necessary for the Gentiles to practice Judean particularities in order to participate in covenant community.

The Philippians text is similarly concerned with Jewish identity markers, as the whole of Chapter Three is dedicated to Paul's first credentialing himself as "circumcised on the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the Church; as to righteousness which is in the law, found blameless." (Phil. 3:5-6) Yet Paul then states that righteousness comes not from his status as a faithful Judean, but comes from an active faith concerning the person of Jesus. In the Romans text, Paul is concerned with the righteousness of YHWH, and after dedicating much of the previous segment of the epistle to identifying Judean and Gentile alike as "sinners," Paul discusses the faithfulness of God, Jesus, and Abraham concerning the original promises originating in the Genesis text. For the purposes of a theology of a non-violent atonement, I will focus on the Romans text as it is concerned with the righteousness and faithfulness of both YHWH and Jesus.

Presently, I will discuss the translation of πίστewς Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ as the "faith of Jesus Christ." The most natural reading of the phrase ὁ δικαιοσύνη δὲ θεοῦ διὰ πίστewς Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς πάντες πιστεύοντας (Rom. 3:22) appears to be "a righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ to all the ones believing." Such a translation is not only preferable to the traditional "faith *in* Jesus" for a variety of both linguistic and theological reasons, but fully supports the narrative of Jesus' faithfulness as the primary

component of Christ-centered atonement theology.

Primarily at issue is whether πίστεως Ἰησοῦ should be translated in the subjective genitive (faith is the possession of Jesus the subject) or in the objective genitive (Jesus is the object of the faith of the possessor). The literal translation would appear to render the English as “through faith of Jesus Christ.” However, interpreters have historically made the case that πίστεως Ἰησοῦ is intended to be heard or read in the objective genitive sense. The objective genitive interpretation of the author’s intention is the foundation for the NRSV and others’ rendering Romans 3:22 “through faith in Jesus Christ.”

Yet modern commentators, possibly beginning with Johannes Haussleiter in 1891,<sup>128</sup> have insisted not only that the phrase be translated in the subjective genitive, but that the phrase be *interpreted* as such. Haussleiter and many subsequent scholars have insisted that the Apostle Paul intended the Roman followers of Jesus to hear the phrase in a manner that God’s righteousness was “attested to” (μαρτυρουμένη Rom 3:21) “through the faith of Jesus Christ.” In other words, God was shown to be faithful to the divine covenant promises to Abraham (Rom. 4:13-17) through Jesus’ own covenant faithfulness on behalf of Israel. “Paul understands the story of Israel,” suggests Wright, “to be reaching its climax with the coming and *achievement* of the Messiah.”<sup>129</sup>

Returning to the grammatical debate, however, we find that some scholars are articulating the view that the subjective genitive translation is the most accurate. “The

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128 Johannes Haussleiter, “Der Glaube Jesu Christi und der christliche Glaube” NKZ 2 (1891) cited in Richard B. Hays *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of 3:1 – 4:11*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 142.

129 Wright, 44, *italics added*.

fundamental grammatical question is whether πίστις followed by a proper noun in the genitive case should be understood as faith in X or faith of X,” writes Richard Hays.<sup>130</sup> Ian Wallis points out that instances of Pauline use of πίστις followed by a genitive “favor, if not demand, a subjective interpretation.”<sup>131</sup> A survey of Greek Testament texts produces 24 instances of faith followed by a genitive.<sup>132</sup> With Mark 11:22 providing an exception to the rule (πίστιν θεοῦ), and excluding the Pauline passages in dispute (Romans and Galatians), each Greek Testament instance of an objective genitive involving πίστις (or “faith in X) contains the prepositions ἐν or εἰς.<sup>133</sup> In the undisputed Paulines, the apostle uses the preposition ἐν in Romans 3:25, and Galatians 2:16 (one instance) and 3:26. All other occurrences of πίστις are subject to the disputes of the present project.

“Apart from Paul,” writes Wallis, “there are no unambiguous cases in the New Testament where πίστις followed by Christ or God in the genitive case must be interpreted objectively.”<sup>134</sup> George Howard surveyed the Septuagint in 1979 for instances of similar grammatical construction which included the noun πίστις and found similar results.

It was inappropriate to the Hellenistic Jewish mentality to express the object of faith by means of the objective genitive. Though a textbook case can be made for it, in actual practice it does not appear. Characteristically the writers use the preposition when they wish to express the object.<sup>135</sup>

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130 Hays, 148.

131 Ian Wallis, *The Faith of Jesus Christ in Early Christian Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 69.

132 A personal count finds such instances at Mk. 11:22; Acts 3:16, 20:21, 24:24 and 26:18; Rom. 3:3, 22, 25, 26, 4:12, 4:16; Gal. 2:16 (two instances plus an instance of καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς Χριστὸν ἐπιστεύσαμεν), 3:22, and 26; Eph. 3:12; Phil. 2:17, 3:9; Col. 1:4, 2:5; James 1:3; 1Tim 2:5; 2 Tim. 3:15;

133 One example is found in Colossians 1:4 “τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ literally “the faith of you in Christ Jesus.”

134 Wallis, 71

135 George Howard, *Paul: Crisis in Galatia. A Study in Early Christian Theology*, SNTSMS

Also, subjective genitive skeptic James D.G. Dunn agrees that the more simple subjective rendering is of interest – “there is of course, something seductively attractive about taking the phrase in its most literal English translation – the faith of Christ.” Dunn says more about the issue:

I should make it clear that the *theology* of the subjective genitive reading is powerful, important, and attractive...Moreover, as a theological motif, it seems to me wholly compatible with Paul’s theology; that is, not a component of Paul’s theology but consistent with other emphasis...none of this, however, is to the particular point in dispute. That focus is on the meaning Paul intended...for audiences for hear.<sup>136</sup>

Such theology is apparent in Wright’s translation of Romans 3:22, the centerpiece of the wider passage of 3:21-31 which I will study. Wright translates: “through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah, for the benefit of all who believe” and suggests that “from God’s faithfulness to human faithfulness, when God’s action in fulfillment of covenant is unveiled, it is because God is faithful to what has been promised; when it is received, it is received by that human faith that answers to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, that human faith that is also faithfulness to the call of God in Jesus Christ.”<sup>137</sup>

Since Luther’s reading of Paul, the tendency of scholarship through the centuries has been to highlight an objective reading of πίστewς Ἰησοῦ. Douglass Harink sums up the Lutheran perspective as such:

Generations of readers of Paul since the time of Luther have understood that one must “have faith in” Jesus Christ in order to be “saved.” Indeed, it is not enough to give “mental assent” to God’s work in Jesus. God’s work of justification is completed in the individual only through his or her *whole-hearted trust* in Jesus

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35 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), cited in Hays, 149.

136 James D.G. Dunn, “Once again: ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ” Appendix 1 in Hays, 269, *italics original*.

137 N.T. Wright, “Romans” (*NIB*) Vol. X, 470.

Christ and his atoning sacrifice for sin on the cross and not in any effort, work, or merit of one's own. That is the meaning of being saved by faith, not works.<sup>138</sup>

Harink notices, however, that Paul never places any emphasis on his own faith in Jesus. He does not do so after his conversion experience, or even "at points where it might be advantageous to do so."<sup>139</sup> What the pre-conversion Paul was lacking in his life was not faith in YHWH, or even in Jesus. Paul's faith is not the question. What had been lacking in Paul's pre-conversion life was the "knowledge... not that he must have faith other than works, but that Jesus is indeed the messianic agent of the God of Israel...In whom 'the righteousness that comes from God' is disclosed."<sup>140</sup>

Πίστις Χριστου is thus Paul's shorthand phrase that enables him to place Jesus the Messiah into the ongoing narrative of YHWH and the divine plan for Israel and the rest of creation.<sup>141</sup> God's plan for Israel has come to fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah, as the faith of Jesus has brought covenant promises to realization and Judean and Gentile alike were now able to enjoy the inheritance promised to Abraham.

Key to this understanding of Paul is the understanding of what the messianic hopes of Israel were, and how Paul discusses messianic fulfillment in the context of the epistle to the Roman followers of Jesus. However, I will discuss three important themes of the Romans letter, and how they contrast what Hays prefers to describe as *anthropological* and *christological* readings of the πίστεως Ἰησοῦ phrase, as opposed to the objective and subjective readings.<sup>142</sup> These are the themes of δικαιοσύνη and its cognates, or, as

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138 Douglas Harink *Paul Among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology Beyond Christendom and Modernity*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003) 26

139 *ibid.* 30-31.

140 *ibid.*

141 Wright, 46-47.

142 Richard B. Hays, Πίστις and Pauline Christology: What is at Stake?" in *Pauline*



translated into English, righteousness and justification, and ἀπολυτρόσεως – redemption.

### **Justification by Faith: The Not So “New Perspective on Paul”**

It would be impossible to catalogue the theological thinking that could claim the German Reformation as the catalytic event of its conception. There is no fruit of Luther’s theology so widely harvested (though perhaps bitter tasting) as the “doctrine of justification by faith.” Ernst Käsemann cited “justification by faith” as the “canon within the canon” of Protestant *Sola Scriptura* theology.<sup>143</sup> From Luther’s reading of Romans has developed, over the centuries a caricature of ancient Yahwist faith. In contrast to Luther’s “justification by grace through faith” theology where no believer could ever “work” his or her way into a heavenly post-mortem home, but only by assenting to having a “faith in Jesus Christ” (though there is no need exhibit such faith), Judaism throughout its history has maintained a theology of grace.

According to mainline Protestant theologians, this meant that Judaism was viewed as the “antithesis of Christianity. Judaism was a legalistic religion in which God was remote and inaccessible.”<sup>144</sup> For so many Protestants, this seemed to suggest that ancient Yahwists spent centuries trying to “work” their way into a state of salvation. Wrote Samuel Sandmel; “It can be set down as something destined to endure eternally

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*Theology* Vol. 4 *Pressing On* ed. by Elizabeth Johnson and David M. Hay (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 39.

143 Ernst Käsemann, *Das Neue Testament als Kanon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1970), 405, cited in James D.G. Dunn *The Theology of the Apostle Paul* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 336.

144 E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 35.

that the Christian commentators will disparage Judaism and its supposed legalism.”<sup>145</sup>

E.P. Sanders, and later theologians like Dunn, Wright, and scores of others, have redefined Pauline theology in terms that identify YHWH’s grace as a constant centerpiece of Israel’s belief.

Torah obedience, or “works of the law,” (ἔργων νόμου) was not a means by which ancient Yahwists labored their way into God’s good grace by not eating a goat boiled in its mother’s milk. (Deut. 14:21) Torah obedience was the means by which human beings properly responded to the reality of God’s covenant grace. “*Obedience maintains one’s position in the covenant, but does not earn God’s grace as such.* It simply keeps an individual in the group which is the recipient of God’s grace.”<sup>146</sup>

Thus, when Paul leads the Roman listener into our Romans passage by stating “by works of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight”; Paul is making a statement about who will be “in the group” and how they will maintain that status. Again, a key term in our understanding is δικαιοσύνη. English uses both “justify” and “righteousness” to translate the Greek. Dunn writes that this can be somewhat confusing. “More to the theological point,” he writes, “‘Righteousness’ is a good example of a term whose meaning is more determined by its Hebrew background.” Contemporary English has viewed δικαιοσύνη in the sense of a Hellenistic moral imperative that must be introduced when an individual or institution has been dishonored. “In contrast,” writes Dunn, “In Hebrew thought ‘righteousness’ is a more relational concept – ‘righteousness’ as the meeting of obligation laid upon the individual by the relationship of which he or

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145 Samuel Sandmel, *The First Christian Century in Judaism and Christianity: Certainties and Uncertainties*, (1969) cited in Sanders 33.

146 Sanders, 420, *italics original*.

she is a part.”<sup>147</sup> As mentioned above, an example of such thinking is evident in 1 Samuel 24:17. Saul has been unfaithful to his covenant obligations as the ruler of Israel by failing in his royal duties. David has been deemed “more righteous” because “I will not stretch out my hand against YHWH’s anointed.” (24:10)

In relating to readers what God has done through Jesus Christ, Paul puts the Jesus event into the wider context of the ongoing story of YHWH and Israel. Romans 3:21- 22a reads, “But now apart from the law a righteousness of God has been manifested, being attested to by the law and prophets, a righteousness of God through [the] faith of Jesus Christ.” Paul has identified the righteousness of God as faithfulness to covenant obligations (see also 3:29-30) that were part and parcel of the promises made to Abraham and Sarah.<sup>148</sup> (Romans 4 *passim*) As Dunn and Wright both state, “It should be... evident [that] God’s righteousness was simply part of the fulfillment of his covenant obligation as Israel’s God in delivering, saving, and vindicating Israel, *despite Israel’s own failure*.”<sup>149</sup>

“The covenant people had become part of the problem, not the agents of the solution,” states Wright. “This creates a crisis for God...how is God to be both faithful to the covenant and just in his dealings with the whole creation?”<sup>150</sup> As I will suggest later, the covenant between YHWH and Abraham/Israel was indeed a two-party contract. God was faithful, but Israel had not lived up to its obligation of being a light unto the Gentiles and the living expression of YHWH’s will for humanity. Because of Israel’s

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147 Dunn, *Theology*, 340.

148 Dunn, *Theology*, 342.

149 *Ibid.* 342.

150 Wright, *Paul*, 29.

unrighteousness (Rom. 2:17-29; 3:22b) God was prompted to set things right, to fulfill both ends of the covenant. “Paul could take it for granted that ‘the righteousness of God’ would be understood as God’s action on behalf of human beings.”<sup>151</sup>

Following this thinking makes the translation of πίστεως Ἰησοῦ more intelligible if translated as “the faith of Jesus Christ,” for it is in the faithful life of Jesus of Nazareth that Israel’s covenant obligations have been fulfilled. “Though it would not be strictly accurate,” says Wright, “It would not be a very great hyperbole to say that, for Paul, ‘the righteousness of God’ was one of the titles of Jesus the Messiah himself...God’s plan of salvation has always required a faithful Israelite to fulfill it. Now, at last, God had provided one.”<sup>152</sup> Through the “faith of Jesus Christ” - a faith that ultimately led to execution on a Roman cross – God has been shown to be righteous and faithful to the covenant, and, through that same faith, covenant obligations have been fulfilled on behalf of Israel and the purpose of God’s elect has been fulfilled. Paul sees this event happening in the event of the crucifixion, a sacrifice through which the blood of Jesus demonstrated covenant faithfulness. (Rom. 3:25)

Perhaps now the question remains, why all of the references to “works of the law” in relation to justification. Remember, Torah is not a vehicle for salvation, but a response to the reality of salvation and an identity marker for the elect who will experience such a liberation from the powers and principalities of the world. Presently, I will discuss the idea of redemption that Paul presents in 3:24. Redemption has been widely considered as a metaphor for slave market transaction (and it is). But such liberation from the state of

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151 Dunn, *Theology*, 344.

152 Wright, *Romans*, 470.

slavery has overtones in the narrative of Israel that would be hard to overstate. Paul and the Roman listeners would immediately identify such slave-market language with the Exodus narrative, the Passover event, and the whole of Israel's existence as a people set apart for God's purposes.

The Exodus marks the liberation of a people chosen to live out the covenant between YHWH and Abraham. When the Law of Moses is given at Mt. Sinai, it provides an identity marker for the descendants of Abraham. By the time of Paul; Torah, Sabbath-keeping, and circumcision were notable identity markers of the covenant people. As stated above, they were the identifying marks of "the in group." Yet, the promises to Abraham and Sarah were such that every nation was to be identified as the scions of the promise. (Rom. 4 *passim*) If such an event has taken place through the faithful obedience of Jesus (3:27-30) a new identity marker was necessary, as now there was no distinction between Jew and Greek. *Works of the law no longer identified who was in the group, but instead, a community's exhibiting of faith such as that known in Jesus did.* God will be "just of the justifier of the one of the faith of Jesus." (Rom. 3:26)

## **Justification and Hebrew Narrative**

Rudolf Bultmann, suggests Hays, is the primary spokesperson against applying a narrative hermeneutic to Pauline thinking. Hays also suggests that it is Bultmann who was "once dominant" in Greek Testament studies and that "his *Theology of the New Testament* was a benchmark against which any new hermeneutic proposal ha[s] to be measured."<sup>153</sup>

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153 Hays, *Faith of Jesus Christ*, xxv.

Bultmann identifies Jesus' *death* as *the* emphatic salvific event. "The salvation wrought by Christ's sacrifice is generally termed 'forgiveness of sin.'"<sup>154</sup> Sacrificial death is also the redemptive act in Bultmann's theology. However, there is also his insistence that the obedience and faithfulness of Jesus Christ is *not* salvific, but that "it must be admitted that the 'obedience' and 'love' of the pre-existent Son are not visible data and cannot be directly aimed at the man who is challenged to believe."<sup>155</sup> Bultmann seems to believe that the life of Christ (or, indeed, Christ's own faith), is of little consequence,

For in the proclamation Christ is not the same way present as a great historical person is present in his work and its historical after-effects. For what is involved here is not an influence that takes place in the history of the human mind; what does take place is that a historical person is raised to the rank of the eschatological event. The word which makes this proclamation is itself part of this event, and this word, in contrast to all other historical tradition, accosts the hearer as a challenge. If he heeds this challenge....(It adjudicates) to him death and there by life, then he believes in the risen Christ.<sup>156</sup>

As such, Bultmann can claim that "*the salvation-occurrence is nowhere present except in the proclaiming, accosting, demanding, and promising word of preaching.*" He writes that the salvation event "does not become part of the fact of the past, but constantly takes place anew in the present. It is present not in the after-effect of a significant fact of world-history...[and] does not get absorbed into the evolution of the human mind."<sup>157</sup>

With such statements, says Hays, Bultmann "transvalues all Paul's 'mythological' language into anthropological affirmations."<sup>158</sup> According to Bultmann, to emphasize the

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154 Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 2 trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), 157.

155 *idem.* Vol. 1 304.

156 *ibid.* 306.

157 *ibid.* 302, *italics original.*

158 Hays, *Faith of Jesus Christ*, 49. Paul's mythological language should be understood to

salvation event as a historical occurrence, observable at a specific point along the ongoing narrative of YHWH and Israel (which Bultmann would classify as ahistorical) would be to “objectify” the event through the attempt to insist upon historicity.<sup>159</sup>

Yet, to “demythologize” Paul’s claims about Jesus, and extract them from the context of the narrative of a Creator God who has made promises, chosen and liberated a people, and who was (and is) known to act within the supposed confines of history, makes the claims of salvation through any aspect of the story of Jesus unintelligible. The story of Jesus can only be understood within the realm of human history, a history which Paul knew to be authored by a God who had made covenant with the forbearers of Israel to accomplish certain things on their behalf. “Paul’s letters may then be understood as growing organically out of the process of narration,” writes Hays. Paul’s use of πίστις, δικαιοσύνη, and ἀπολυτρώσεως in the passage which provides for the scope of this project represents the use of a symbolic language, known well known to his Roman listeners, which “calls for interpretation” by the churches.<sup>160</sup>

Paul Ricoeur suggests when new events take place within the structure of an ongoing narrative (perhaps worldview fits better), “It calls for a new speech-act which would paraphrase the first [story].”<sup>161</sup> States Hays, “A Pauline letter could be understood as a ‘new speech-act’ that attempts to rearticulate in discursive language the configurational dimensions of the gospel story.”<sup>162</sup>

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any reference to such stories as the covenant with Abraham, and, of course, the resurrection.

159 *ibid.* 50.

160 Paul Ricoeur, “Biblical Hermeneutics” *Semeia* 4 (1975) 195 cited in Hays *The Faith of Jesus Christ* 25.

161 *Ibid.*

162 Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, 25.

Presently, I must explain what narrative structure has to do with my suggested interpretation of πίστεως Ἰησοῦ in the subjective, or “christological” sense. For centuries, Protestants have been participating mostly, it seems, within the perceived reality of Martin Luther which suggests that individuals are “saved” by having faith in specific theological propositions made on behalf of Jesus Christ. If Bultmann suggests that the life, death, and resurrection are simply events that have no historical meaning, but are given meaning through the preaching of certain proposals rising from the myth of the pre-existing Son, then it makes sense that an individual would need to intellectually assent to certain proclamations concerning the myth to experience the fruits of the cross as a “recognizable...salvation event.”<sup>163</sup> If the proclamation is salvific, then faith in the proclamation is necessary. This is not, however, how the Apostle Paul is hoping that the followers of Jesus in Rome would understand his letter. I propose a different reading of πίστεως Ἰησοῦ as representative of Paul’s understanding of how YHWH has fulfilled covenant promises through the faithful obedience of the person of Jesus the Messiah, whose faithful *life* fully recognizes the covenant obligations of Israel, and is, thus, a specific (and no less) *historic* salvific event. Again, Genesis 15 provides the context for a narrative understanding of πίστεως Ἰησοῦ and a fresh reading of Romans 3:21-30 that deemphasizes the “Lutheran” reading and the Bultmann demythologizing project.

Paul, and all of Israel, understood that covenant faithfulness and righteousness were the obligation of Israel if they were to fulfill their role as a light unto the nations. YHWH promised Abraham and Sarah that all the families of the earth would be blessed through

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163 Bultmann, Vol. 1, 302, 303.



their descendants. (Gen. 12:4) But Israel had a very difficult time remaining faithful to the Creator God. This was foreshadowed in the covenant scene of Genesis 15. There would be a need for a faithful Judean who was the chosen representative of YHWH to accomplish faithfulness on Israel's behalf. As stated just as explicitly above, this faithful Judean was Jesus the Messiah.

## **Conclusions**

While there is not the space in this project to further investigate the possibility of a non-violent "atonement" on the part of Jesus, I have used the above study of the Last Supper and Romans as a springboard for the suggestion that it was indeed the life and ministry of Jesus that fulfilled Israel's covenant righteousness, and effectively brings salvation to the world by bringing the Gentiles into a covenant relationship with YHWH. As such, Jesus' Messiahship meant to offer Israel liberation from its idolatrous interpretations of covenant relationship with YHWH. Remember back to Genesis 15, as I will explore the covenant ceremony between Abraham and YHWH, and its implications for Jesus' messianic ideal.

As stated above, covenant faithfulness and righteousness were the obligation of Israel if they were to fulfill their role as a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation." YHWH promised Abraham that all the families of the earth would be blessed through his descendants. But Israel had a very difficult time remaining faithful to the covenant God. Abraham, in Genesis 15, is portrayed as being fully aware that he and his descendants could hardly be expected to be wholly faithful to YHWH's expectations. When YHWH invites Abraham to participate in a covenant ritual, Abraham is overcome by "terror and

great darkness,” (15:12) and does not participate in the ritual. Instead, the author of the Genesis story suggests that YHWH made the covenant with Abraham, by taking responsibility for both covenant parties. While Abraham is not able to walk between the carcasses, YHWH, as doubly represented in the “smoking oven and flaming, passed between these pieces.” (15:17) In essence, God foresees covenant unfaithfulness in the future of Israel, and promises to uphold covenant responsibility in Israel’s stead.

According to the covenant narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures, it is not an atoning *death* that satisfies the covenant obligations of Israel, or brings salvation to all the nations. It is righteousness and faithfulness, as demanded of Israel and the monarchs throughout the Scriptures, that justifies Israel in the sight of YHWH and enables Israel to satisfy YHWH’s intentions for the Chosen People. That being, to bring salvation to a world that has not yet known the God of Abraham and Sarah.

Jesus was not the messiah that Israel expected. He was fully believing, however, that he represented the critical point in history in which the future of Israel hung in the balance. Israel, especially its religious and political authorities, had betrayed YHWH’s intentions to facilitate a just society that prioritized caring for the poor, the widow, and the marginalized. Jesus believed that Israel’s valuing of inheritance over the reflecting of God’s will had mired the nation in a state of idolatry. He believed that Israel’s esteem for their descendancy from the seed of Abraham and Sarah had muddied the waters of YHWH’s original intention for election, that being the creation of a nation through which the whole world would be adopted into the line of the covenant family. Jesus was aware that the violence that had been inherent in Israel’s response to injustice and oppression

was leading God's people to certain destruction. He lived a life that not only stood in tension with the first-century expressions of Judaism and empire, but that expressed God's intentions for covenantal faithfulness.

It is most important, however, to remember that Jesus was acting as a faithful Galilean Yahwist who believed firmly in the ongoing narrative of a deity who was working toward the redemption of the whole world through God's chosen people. Jesus' ministry and faithfulness is intended, especially by Jesus, as a messianic action that claims the "Day of YHWH" has come, and that covenants are fulfilled through his actions. The Davidic line is restored, and salvation has come to those who follow his royal example. It is the faithfulness of Jesus Christ through which YHWH acts in history to liberate creation from its bondage to empire, and the reign of political and economic dominance and violence. Through the life of Jesus, the world is brought into right relationship with God, and the claims of empire are brought into question.

None of this was obvious to even the most hopeful of first-century Yahwists. Jesus of Nazareth was, after all, executed for his trouble. Like a common insurrectionist, and like so many before and after him, Jesus challenged the power structures of the world and lost. It must have appeared to many that he lost resoundingly. His followers, scattered and fearful, seemed to forget the promises made by Jesus that he would return. As everyone in the world of the first century was fully aware of, death was the end. Death was the reality with which Rome and Jerusalem brought to bear on every challenger to their authority. Death reaffirmed the power of Caesar and empire.

A few days after his death, however, a story was circulating around Jerusalem. The

disciples of Jesus were making the claim that they had made contact with a Jesus who was very much alive. He *had* been dead - very dead - they all knew. Yet, the story was going around that Jesus had been resurrected. If this was true, then the empire and the aristocracy had not won. The Nazarene who preached peace had been vindicated by YHWH, his life an example of covenant faithfulness that brought about God's acting in history to verify every claim that the Messiah Jesus made. The kingdom of God *had been* inaugurated, not only by the life of Jesus, but by the hope and promise of resurrection that facilitated the belief of disciples that the covenant faithful would be vindicated for their suffering and obedience as well. Jesus exemplified covenant relationship, expressed through the ancient and ongoing narrative of Abraham and Sarah, the Exodus and the command for justice, through Israel, David, and the people of God. This is the Truth of the God of Israel, and the Messiah Jesus of Nazareth. Such is the claim of communities of Christ.

# Chapter Four

## Jesus, Resurrection, and the Truth of the Covenant God

Of the many objections that the above narrative might meet, three stand out most clearly. One objection will be that the idea of non-violent atonement itself strays much too far from Christian orthodoxy to be validated through the use of standard (Wesleyan) measures of truth, those of Scripture, Church tradition, and reason. (Some may allow that one's experience might validate certain aspects of such a reading.) Another objection, a more secular complaint than the first, would simply be concerned with reason. Perhaps not beginning in the Renaissance, but growing more common during that age, is the insistence that the biblical text cannot be assumed to be authoritative in the realm of science, or more specifically, as a means of asserting truthfulness. The quest for universal truth has rendered the particular claims of the Bible obsolete. Finally, twenty-first century critics of the narrative would say that its reliance upon an already refuted meta-narrative that has been responsible for so much injustice through history render the claims made by the reading as lacking in any overarching value for humanity, or history as a whole.

## **Enlightenment Thinking and Modernity: An Exodus from the Bonds of Tradition and History**

*Enlightenment promises freedom from the overpowering forces of nature,  
yet enslaves us to a second nature  
(in the form of economic, technical, and bureaucratic necessity);  
It provides us with power to fashion our world and our identities,  
Yet reveals our impotence and self-arrogance.  
Even though the economic apparatus  
provides for the individual as never before,  
the individual disappears before the apparatus that serves him.  
Enlightenment...paradoxically brings  
Both liberation and slavery, freedom and constraint,  
Self-conscious transparency and ignorant opacity  
about what it is we are doing to ourselves, to our world, and to others.<sup>164</sup>*

The environment that fueled so much demand for substantial social and ecclesiastical change in Reformation Europe proved to be a fertile battleground for differences concerning the canonical texts of Christianity. Renaissance scholarship brought with it the academic tools to facilitate new focus upon the literal and historical meaning of the Bible, and at first seemed a welcomed discipline by Reformation scholars. Phyllis Bird writes that many Reformers believed the original meaning of the texts would be recovered, and freed from bondage to “dogmatic interpretation and ecclesiastical control.” On the other hand, many Church leaders feared, and rightly so, that “free thinkers, as well as others, openly hostile to the Church... saw in the new criticisms a means to unmask religion and reject its supernatural claims by exposing the Bible’s human character, crude expression, and fallibility.”<sup>165</sup> It is not just the Bible that came under attack during the Renaissance, but much of religious expression in general.

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164 Christopher Rocco, “Between Modernity and Postmodernity: Reading Dialectic of Enlightenment Against the Grain” *Political Theory* Vol. 22, No. 1, 1994, 79.

165 Phyllis A. Bird, “The Authority of the Bible” *NIB*, Vol. I, 54.

Enlightenment thinkers of the seventeenth century added fuel to the fire.

The Enlightenment period (building upon a foundation established by Descartes) is characterized by a belief that humanity could somehow find a means to achieve its own measure of “salvation” through the application of reason to any variety of social problems. Self-reliance and individuality were the means to achieve such a standard, with persons bent on progress overcoming the baggage of “traditionalism, obscurantism, and authoritarianism.”<sup>166</sup> Just as rationalists such as Spinoza challenged the realities of unexamined authority and the relationship between Church and state, empiricists such as Thomas Hobbes studied the means by which words received meaning “to demonstrate that certain metaphysical doctrines are, quite literally, meaningless.”<sup>167</sup> Quite often, the historic Christian thinking was being overshadowed by classical Greco-Roman philosophy. Traditional beliefs in the sovereignty of a God who acted in human history were challenged, and much Enlightenment religious thinking was characterized by Deism.

Modern rationalism and empiricism became the antithesis to the traditional claims of the veracity of the biblical narrative. Thinkers such as David Hume “worked to undermine belief in divine revelation and miracles, and consequently, both the authority and the content of the biblical gospels were attacked.”<sup>168</sup> The idea that history was the result of providence or divine guidance was rejected, and that the academic pursuit

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166 “Enlightenment” *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy (PDP)* edit. by Thomas Mautner (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2005), 187.

167 Roger Scruton, *From Descartes to Wittgenstein: A Short History of Modern Philosophy*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 84.

168 Brian D. Ingrassia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3.

should include a search for the causes of events, not just the facts of them. Hobbes called history the “register of knowledge of fact.”<sup>169</sup>

Morally, the deviation from the belief that God was the instiller of human values was characterized by the belief that happiness and pleasure were the ideal moral guides, and that morals were dictated upon what actions produced the greatest experience of happiness and pleasure for the greatest number of people. While Emmanuel Kant later challenged this early type of utilitarianism, it had long-reaching effects, as evidenced in the work of John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham in the nineteenth century. Kant suggested that the moral worth of a person is made evident not in what they do, but by the spirit in which they do it. He also challenged the utilitarian schemata by stating that a categorical imperative existed, formulated as “always act so that you are able to will that the maxim of your action be also a universal law.” In other words, you should act as if you would if your actions could be made universal law, that you should never treat a person as a means to an end, but as an end-in-themselves, and that one should be regarded, not only as legislator of universal law, but as subject of it.<sup>170</sup>

Kant did not, however, construct a philosophy that produced theological fruit. He believed that religion was no more than the “apprehension of all duties as divine commands.”<sup>171</sup> Moral law was not compelling to Kant because it was God-given, but

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169 Mautner defines modernity as such: “At the core of [the concept] is the nineteenth and twentieth century world of nation states, political democracy, capitalism, urbanization, mass literacy, mass media, mass culture, rationality, anti-traditionalism, secularization, faith in science, large scale industrial enterprise, enlightenment ideals and a public ideology in which liberal, progressive, humanitarian ideals are prominent. 397

170 “Emmanuel Kant” in *PDP*, 99-100.

171 Scruton, 159.



because it had its force due to its being interpreted *as if* divinely inspired. Kant saw that a religion of pure reason (or, a pure religion of reason), was the future aim of both the Enlightenment task, and of the Church void of ancient tradition. Joseph Runzo details Kant's epistemological principles for religion as follows:

(First) There are only two types of religion: revealed religion and rational religion. 2) It is *impossible* for revealed religion to provide sufficient epistemic justification for theistic truth-claims. 3) It is *possible* for rational religion to provide sufficient epistemic justification for theistic truth-claims. 4) Therefore only a rational religion can provide sufficient epistemic justification for theistic truth-claims. 5) It is the practical vocation of every rational person to think for oneself. 6) Rational religion encourages one to think for oneself. 7) Therefore rational religion is the only epistemically justifiable form of religion, and it promotes the proper vocation of any rational person.<sup>172</sup>

Empiricism and Kant rejected the idea of a God who revealed the divine will in any way. He felt one could only "know God" in an intuitive sense. Such feelings may hold some intimate personal value, but such feelings cannot be assigned any value as literal truth.<sup>173</sup>

Ludwig Feuerbach provides an example of a sort of culmination of Enlightenment thought concerning theological truth-claims. Feuerbach submitted that the concept of God, and any religious claim in general, is nothing more than the imaginary projections of the perceived best of human qualities. "We cannot conceive God otherwise," he wrote, "than by attributing to him without limit all the real qualities which we find in ourselves."<sup>174</sup>

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172 Joseph Runzo, "Kant on Reason and Justified Belief in God" in Philip J. Rossi and Michael Wreen, eds. *Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 25-26

173 Scruton, 159.

174 Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. by George Eliot (New York: Harper And Row, 1957), 38.

The notions of the Enlightenment and Modernity are readily evident in the twentieth century as well. Pertaining to issues ranging from miracles and resurrection to issues of particularity concerning the Christian faith, Schubert Ogden writes: “if the price for becoming a faithful follower of Jesus Christ is some form of self-destruction, whether of the body or mind – *sacrificium corporis, sacrificium intellectus* - then there is no alternative but that the price remain unpaid.”<sup>175</sup> Modernity has produced persons who generally do not consider themselves open to the possibility of supernatural powers or deities who have influence over the day-to-day aspects of life, or over history in general. Such a person views him or herself, according to Ogden, “as a unified being and attributes [such] experience, thought, and volition to [his or her] own agency, not to divine or demonic causes.”<sup>176</sup> Ogden is taking his cue from Rudolph Bultmann, who he believes insists that each human being must take responsibility for his or her own existence, or that “‘Salvation’ and all it implies will be meaningless.” Robert Funk asserts that from such thinking it follows that “a history of salvation which attributes saving efficacy to certain historical events, whether miraculous or not, is not only incredible but irrelevant.”<sup>177</sup>

Indeed, the question of ethics among contemporary empiricists has concerned itself with, not how to find rational means of incorporating religious experience into the formulation of “universals,” but with the moral responsibilities of shattering

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175 Schubert M. Ogden, *Christ Without Myth: A Study on the Theology of Rudolph Bultmann*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), 130.

176 *ibid.* 35.

177 Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and the Word of God: The Problem of Language in the New Testament and Contemporary Theology*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 89.

“provincial myths.” Philip Kitcher states that “truth is not to be identified with what members of some specific community believe.” He sees the role of scientific enquiry as one in which someone rejects “the conventional wisdom of the learned community, using procedures of inquiry to articulate some new truth.” However, Kitcher acknowledges that such empirically discovered truth “may not promote the happiness of the inquirer or of anyone else, [yet] judges the resulting state to be better than the starting point.” Thus, for empiricists, the moral dilemma is not that there has to this point failed to be a universally held truth derived from reason, but that once a specific community’s belief is somehow “discredited” by science, they will somehow be destined toward despair, but better for it nonetheless.<sup>178</sup>

Paul van Buren, writing in 1963, may have been more kind toward the empiricist community’s assumptions than others, but seems to have stated most appropriately what it has meant for much of the modern Western world. “The empiricist in us finds the heart of the difficulty not in what is said about God, but in the very talking about God at all. We do not know ‘what’ God is, and we cannot understand how the word ‘God’ is being used.” Such spiritual status suggests, writes van Buren, that “secular humanity is not necessarily godless, but no longer knows how to express faith experiences in acceptable theistic terms.”<sup>179</sup> However, while the projects of the Enlightenment and modernity have deeply entrenched places in both philosophical, and perhaps surprisingly, theological thought, critics abound.

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178 Philip Kitcher, “Truth or Consequences” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 72, No. 2 1988, 50 Kitcher calls the process “painful enlightenment.” 54.

179 Paul van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel Based on an Analysis of Language*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), 84.

“Contrary to Enlightenment thinking,” states Christopher Rocco, “the opposition between myth and enlightenment is not absolute.” He states that the opposition is overcome when an overarching myth calls into question humanity’s singular confidence “in the progress of reason and the superiority of modern cultural accomplishments.”<sup>180</sup>

Reason, which once worked by thought and concepts, now refers to method alone. Indifferent to the qualitatively and individually unique, insensitive to multiplicity and particularity, impatient with tradition and history, as well as with religion, metaphysics and philosophy...the aim of the Enlightenment is the subsumption of all particulars under the general, the substitute of formula for concept, rule and probability for cause and motive.<sup>181</sup>

Rocco also views the Enlightenment view of history as “the register of knowledge of fact”; as being suspect. “Systems claim their concepts to be adequate to their subject. They claim to have identified it fully...But reality does not go into its concept without remainder.”<sup>182</sup>

Systems inevitable enter into conflict with the “objects” they purport to grasp. The multiplicity of qualities disappears in the system only to return to later contradict it. History defies systems...as the dialectic of Enlightenment attests. If history does have any unity, it is not given by any systematic construction but by suffering.<sup>183</sup>

Additionally, what empiricist seemingly fail to observe is that science is not a practice in verifying or finalizing truth. Herbert Bernstein writes:

Rather, science seeks consistency. One cannot claim more than that, for many things that are not scientific possess their own truth...They include the mystic knowledge of God, the universal comprehension of psychedelic experiences, or the wisdom of traditional understanding in supposed primitive cultures. Indeed...science even rule(s) out some phenomena, to science, they simply do not exist.<sup>184</sup>

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180 Rocco, 74

181 *ibid.* 80.

182 *ibid.* 83-84.

183 *ibid.* 84.

184 Herbert J. Bernstein, “Idols of Modern Science and the Reconstruction of Knowledge” in Marcus G Raskin and H.J. Bernstein eds. *New Ways of Knowing: The Sciences, Society, and*

Facts require interpretation, and modernity denies an individual or community the very tools with which to interpret, by denying the value of the contributions of metaphysics.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of the Enlightenment is that it isolates the narrative (or traditional/mythic) qualities of corporate life and renders them obscure – all the while developing insular theories of social behavior that are relevant only to other theorists. What is lacking in the practice of prioritizing reason to the *exclusion* of other ways of knowing is that “reason is calculative; it can assess truths of fact and nothing more,” writes Alasdair MacIntyre. “In the realm of practice therefore it can only speak of means. About ends, it must be silent.”<sup>185</sup> It is this concept of *telos* that gives meaning to any practice - or intention, as Kant might have it.

Nietzsche insisted that formal reason is not in any sense related to morality than it is to those actions deemed immoral. There is no logical reasoning that unquestionably refutes, according to Rocco, the conclusion that murder, or genocide, or bombing civilian targets is immoral. The Enlightenment, given as it is to universals – gives occasion to modern political leaders such as Hitler and Stalin, whose regimes were propped up upon the totems of empirical claims. Enlightenment thinking also acts to justify such “reasonable” actions such as the bombing of Dresden, and the atrocities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>186</sup> “The mathematics and physics men have their mythology,” writes poet Robin Jeffers. “Their equations are false, but their things *work*...their equations bombed

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*Reconstructive Knowledge*, (Totawa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987), 45.

185 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1984), 54.

186 Rocco, 79.

Hiroshima, the terrible things *worked*.”<sup>187</sup>

If there is a particular aspect of failure to be attributed to Modernity, it is that the Enlightenment promise of freedom (including freedom from one’s own history), liberation, and autonomy would somehow generate a humanity that would fully realize its own potential through the application of rationality and reason has never materialized. Rocco cites the observations of Michael Foucault in writing that:

The enlightenment discourse of liberation – whether it is bound up with pseudo-scientific discourse of psychological, physical, or social therapies – simultaneously contains and conceals its opposite...The streamlined, functional, and efficient language of modern science – both natural and social...serves to exclude or silence the multifaceted, varied, and heterogeneous elements of experience that do not fit neatly into its explanatory schema.<sup>188</sup>

MacIntyre addresses this in his discussion of human rights, the battle cry of late modernity. He states that there is no concept of such rights in history prior to the fifteenth century, and, that “it only follows that no one could have known what they were.” No matter how the empiricist might try, as alluded to above concerning the realities of genocide and carpet-bombing, there is no more rational basis for suggesting that an established concept of human rights exist any more than there is a rational claim undergirding one’s beliefs in “witches and in unicorns.”<sup>189</sup> He further states that “every attempt to give good reasons for believing that there *are* such rights has failed. The eighteenth-century philosophical defenders of natural rights sometimes suggest...[they] are self-evident truths; but we know that there are no self-evident truths.”<sup>190</sup>

It is not my intention (nor MacIntyre’s) to assert that human rights claims are not

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187 Robin Jeffers, *The Beginning and the End*, cited by Bernstein, 55.

188 *ibid.* 78-79.

189 MacIntyre, 69.

190 *Ibid. italics original.*

valuable assets to human existence and justice seeking. My intention is to suggest that, without the human experience, a history of suffering, or a non-empirical realization that life has inherent worth, the Enlightenment notion that reason is the sole means of “salvation” is corrupt.

Inevitably, the institutional Church could not escape the lure of “reason alone,” and has limped through the recent past, paralleling the commitments and goals of modernity. “That is, just as Western culture...sought an independent rational justification for morality, so also the Western Church has sought independent rational justification for the gospel.” Jonathan Wilson writes, “Just as the Enlightenment project to justify morality was bound to fail, the Church’s version of the Enlightenment project also had to fail.”<sup>191</sup>As any number of apologetic exercises over the last century are witness to this. Kant preceded such exercises by attempting to bound religion in the ties of rationality. Theologians more recently have sought to justify Christian theological claims without reference to the gospel narratives. Like MacIntyre’s proposal that Enlightenment morality was using the language of a past moral structure to account for a morality that was contrived from a wholly other set of assumptions,<sup>192</sup> Wilson insists that the Enlightenment Church has been acting to justify Christian moral principles by shoehorning them into a schemata of rationality and reason. In the process, the Church has discontinued relying upon the gospel narratives as its primary, if not sole, source of ethics.<sup>193</sup>

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191 Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre’s After Virtue*, in *Christian Mission and Modern Culture* edit. by Alan Neely et. al (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 42.

192 MacIntyre, Chpt. 5, *passim*.

193 Wilson, 44.

Thus, while the Enlightenment critique of the proposed narrative will find it void of any rational basis (rejecting claims of salvation, resurrection, or divinely revealed morality as empirically unfounded), Enlightenment thought also fails to generate tangible evidence for any empirical source of human being, value, or goal. As history has shown, however, Modernity has failed to produce any liberating or salvific alternatives to the reality of human suffering. Additionally, the Enlightenment project has spawned criticisms from other philosophical voices, which have also proved to be suspicious of theological claims in particular. Postmodern thinking declares human freedom from the supposed confines of religion as well. Postmodernism, according to Brian Ingrassia, is defined by the “freedom to create one’s own values set against submission to an absolute truth, the autonomy of human beings set against obedience to a transcendent God...[and] against belief in any final, authoritative meaning.”<sup>194</sup>

## **The Failure of Philosophical Alternatives**

*Truth is a thing of this world:  
it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint.  
And it produces regular effects of power.  
Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth:  
That is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true...*<sup>195</sup>

The challenges to Christocentric truth-claims did not begin with the rise of empiricism, however, and the challenges do not end there. Philosophical minds of the last hundred years or more have been busy dismantling not only the truth-claims of

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194 Ingrassia, 6.

195 Michel Foucault, *Power and Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 131.



modernity, but have worked to assail every meta-narrative or foundational truth claim as first, being patently untrue, and secondly, inherently oppressive.<sup>196</sup> Postmodernism suggests that the claim that there is a God who acts in history, or perhaps more particularly, that the actions attributed to a first-century Judean are *universally* efficacious – and authoritative - not only lacks credibility, but has been used by powerful elites to underwrite the oppressive machinations of various empires throughout history.

Postmodern thought not only views God “as a fiction or a projection of man [*sic*], as in modernism, but the Christian God is rejected as *bad* fiction.”<sup>197</sup> Indeed, Nietzsche likens claims to truth based on any empirical or metaphysical foundation to a “mobile army of metaphors.”

What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm...truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are, metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now only matter as metal, no longer as coins.<sup>198</sup>

Nietzsche’s disdain for God, or god, or any claim concerning deity is well known, and just as worn as the claims he attacks. He does not believe the Enlightenment project has done enough to dismantle theism with its “religion of reason” or tendencies toward deism. “That we find no god – either in history or in nature or behind nature is not what differentiates *us* [from the Enlightenment], but that we experience what has been

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196 Jean-Francois Lyotard identifies postmodern thinking as being defined by an “incredulity toward meta-narratives. Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” trans. Regis Durand in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 24.

197 Ingrassia, 2.

198 Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-moral Sense” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954), 46-47.

revered as God, not as “godlike, but as miserable, as absurd, as harmful, not merely as an error but as a *crime against life*. We deny God as God.”<sup>199</sup>

Postmodernity is a “deconstruction” of propositions concerning not only varying metaphysical claims proposed by multiple cultures, but also against socio-economic and political truth-claims made by empires (or simply nation states) in competition for resources and political power. Jean-Francois Lyotard noticed that modernity, in all of its forms and wherever it appeared, tended to shatter metaphysical beliefs and perpetrate the notions that specific realities apparently lacked substance, in favor of empirically invented realities championed by the victors in history.<sup>200</sup> This is evident in the presently dominant meta-narratives founded upon economic philosophies such as free-market capitalism (Locke, Adam Smith), and state-sponsored socialism (Marx), that have been oppressive tools of nation-states in securing power in the struggle for resources.<sup>201</sup> Marcus Raskin levels the charge of idolatry against the narratives of empire. He believes that virtuous characteristics have falsely been attributed to the practices of colonizing knowledge, capitalism, militarism, and social order.<sup>202</sup>

More positively stated, however, postmodernism “suggests that the search for

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199 Nietzsche, “The AntiChrist” ed. Kaufmann, 647.

200 Jean-Francois Lyotard , "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" trans. Regis Durand, 77.

201 The narrative spawned by Smith’s pen, “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity, but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.” is an example of an Enlightenment narrative that firmly contradicts Christ-centered praxis. Interestingly, even in its official atheism, the basic tenet of Marxism reflects a measure of the “Acts Two Church” in its maxim “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.”

202 Marcus G. Raskin, “Reconstruction and its Knowledge Method” in Raskin and Berstein. 23.

ultimate or universal...conceptual strategies should be abandoned in favor of local, pragmatic justifications.”<sup>203</sup>

A comprehensive treatment of postmodern thinking is not possible at this time. However such surveys exist and are beneficial to the reader seeking fuller understanding.. I simply offer a few philosophical tenets that, are implicitly helpful to aspects of the proposals made by the theological narrative of the first three chapters of this project.

Important to the postmodern critique of universalism is an insistence that all truth-claims are relative. Universal claims based upon reason cannot be shown to be any more universally true than the metaphysical claims they attempted to replace. “When [empiricism] appeals solely to the truth of a discourse to authorize it intellectually and socially, one represses reflection on its practical-moral meaning and its social consequences,” writes Steven Seidman. “A discourse that justifies itself solely by epistemic appeals will not be compelled to defend its conceptual decisions on moral and political grounds.”<sup>204</sup>

Additionally, the claims of both pre-modern and modern meta-narratives are human constructs buoyed by particular language. Richard Rorty writes:

The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only other human beings can do that... Languages are made rather than found, and...truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences.<sup>205</sup>

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203 Steven Seidman, “The End of Sociological Theory: The Postmodern Hope” in *Sociological Theory* Vol. 9, No. 2, 1991, 134.

204 Ibid. 135

205 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 6-7; cited in James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, (Downers Grove, IL:

James Sire suggests that Rorty is saying “Truth is whatever we can get our colleagues (our community) to agree to. If we can get them to use our language...our story is as true as any story will ever get.”<sup>206</sup> Yet, the possibility that the languages are useful in certain situations do allow that there is value to each story, at least within a specific context. Pragmatism is a key component to navigating a postmodern world, according to Sire. Seidman believes that pragmatism has the advantage of diversifying and enlarging the number of voices participating as equals in social discussions.<sup>207</sup>

Languages are also a way in which persons attempt to grasp onto power, or to wrestle it away from another. The modern assumption that one epistemology or, in the postmodern sense, that one story or language, is preferred over another, leads to violence and oppression. As such, the postmodern thinker attributes oppressive inherencies to each and every epistemology or language. Such are the assumptions of thinkers such as Michael Foucault, Edward Said, and others.<sup>208</sup> “The claim to truth,” writes Seidman, “is inextricably an act of power – a will to form humanity...concealed in the will to truth is a will to power.”<sup>209</sup>

I use caution in expanding this brief perusal of postmodern thought, mostly in deference to the warning in Penguin’s *Dictionary of Philosophy* that

postmodernism can mean many different things, and an author who wishes to be understood will have to explain the intended sense. This precaution is often neglected. Many writers begin with an admission that they have no clear

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InterVarsity Press, 2004), 221.

206 Sire, 221.

207 Seidman, 135.

208 Chris K. Huebner , *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity*, (Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 2006), 103.

209 Seidman, 135.

definition of post-modernism and that it is not clear what is covered by the term, but then proceed to celebrate it at length.<sup>210</sup>

Presently, I will respond to the assumed critiques of my theological project as I understand them to be according to the tenets of modernity, and postmodern thought. In doing so, I will draw heavily from some postmodern assumptions, but focus mainly on the possible truthfulness, or, credibility, of narrative claims, and the value of meta-narratives in the context of localized communities when remembered, retold, and lived out in a *non-coercive* fashion. Human beings are, in actions and practice - and in fictions - story-tellers. We become through oral and written history a people who tell stories that aspire to truth. "I can only answer the question, 'what am I to do?'" writes MacIntyre, "If I can answer the question, 'of what story or stories do I find myself apart of?'"<sup>211</sup>

## The Narrative Response

*"The test of each story is the sort of person it shapes"*<sup>212</sup>

Life experiences of every sort are lived out, remembered, and retold in narrative form. It is the stories we tell that underwrite an identity or worldview of an individual, a community, or an institution. James Pambrun writes that "narrative affirms a relationship to reality. Meaning is generated in the dialectical exchange between the story-like feature and the history-like feature of narrative."<sup>213</sup> A grandparent or parent remembers and shares the story of their life with younger family members. A story of the storm on the night of the first-born's birth, or the sacrifices made by earlier

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210 "post-modern" in *PDP*, 483.

211 MacIntyre, 101.

212 Stanley Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations in Christian Ethics*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 35.

213 James R. Pambrun, "Hermeneutical Theology and Narrative" in *Theoforum* Ottawa: Vol.32 no.3, 283.

generations during World War II, reveal the truth of lived experiences. Children ask over and over again of their mothers and fathers, "Tell us how you met," while new couples share intimately with one another the stories and dreams of their lives. Churches, political parties and community organizations all share stories of "the way things were" when they decided to pull together or take action to make dreams of a new community life a reality. Pivotal persons, events, and crisis or victories, are all remembered in anecdotal stories that remind elders of their roots, and inform newcomers of the expectations and integrity of the community. Writes Stanley Hauerwas:

First, narrative formally displays our existence and that of the world of creatures – as *contingent* beings. Narrative is required precisely because the world and events in the world do not exist by necessity. Any attempt to depict our world and ourselves non-narratively is doomed to failure insofar as it denies our contingent nature. Correlatively, narrative is epistemically fundamental for our knowledge of God and ourselves, since we come to know ourselves only in God's life.

Second, narrative is the characteristic form of our awareness of ourselves as *historical* beings who must give an account of the purposive relation between temporally discrete realities. Indeed, the ability to provide such an account, to sustain its growth in a living tradition whose manifold storylines are meant to help individuals identify and navigate a path to the good. The self is subordinate to the community rather than vice-versa, for we discover the self through a community's narrated tradition.<sup>214</sup>

## **How Can It Be True? Claims Made by Religion and the Possibility of Truth**

The question remains, are narratives true (regardless of facticity)? The meta-narrative of Chapters One through Three fails to meet the criterion that Enlightenment/modernity thinking demands of truth-claims. Shown above, and here

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214 Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 29.

restated, the enlightened Hume simply reflected upon the diversity of religious beliefs that existed in the world - as opposed to a universal expression of a divine being - as proof of the unreasonableness of faith. "Some nations have discovered, who entertain no sentiments of religion," wrote Hume, "If travelers and historians may be credited, and no two nations, and scarce any two men, have ever agreed precisely in the same sentiments." Hume continues, "It would appear, therefore, that this preoccupation springs not from an original instinct or primary impression of nature."<sup>215</sup>

Interestingly, much of Christendom will reject narrative as the most intelligible theological language. R.C. Sproul suggests, in a somewhat hyper-reasonable manner, that a rational, Bible-based theology surpasses the requirements of Enlightenment epistemology. He writes:

If we seek a coherent, logical, consistent, and rational understanding of the Bible, we are immediately accused of worshipping at the shrine of Aristotle. Because the philosophy of rationalism has often been hostile to Christianity, we flee from anything that remotely seems like rationalism...Christianity is not rationalism. But it is rational. It may have truth beyond what reason can fathom. But it is more rational, not less.<sup>216</sup>

Since there is no reasonable way that the Bible, in order to be the coherent revelation of an ultimately understandable God, can hold contradiction because contradiction stands opposed to reason, Enlightenment influenced Christians have attributed inerrant qualities to the text, calling apparent contradictions "paradoxes" or "mysteries."<sup>217</sup> Sproul suggests that the failure of Christendom to maintain spiritual (or

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215 David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. H.E. Root (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957), 21. cited by Louis Dupré *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 263.

216 R.C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992), xvii.

217 *ibid.* xviii.

otherwise) dominance in the Western world is very much due to the lack of rational thinking amongst those who have been bombarded by postmodern assumptions.

Of course, postmodernism and its adherents will maintain that any narrative is relative, and that any overarching story such as the one presented by this project will be used in service of power grasps. All stories are a quest for power, and throughout history each Christian version of its story has been a tool of dominance.

Postmodern thought, however, as radically vague as its assumptions can be, leaves room, not only for an apparently inherently relative truth-claim to hold the possibility of being identified as true, if not simply truthful, but to avoid reliance on pragmatism to support its “relative” veracity. One aspect of postmodern assumptions, rarely overlooked, is that the very claims made by such thinkers are in fact dependent upon an understanding that there must be the *possibility* of a claim to be credible, if there is any credibility to the postmodern venture. George Lindbeck writes that religious claims, like any other, must be allowed the possibility of making categorically true statements as well as those that are deemed symbolically true. He states, “We must also allow for its possible propositional truth.”<sup>218</sup> Following Lindbeck’s example, I will use the term *Christus est Dominus* (Christ is Lord) as a test of his thesis.

First, Lindbeck states a difference between “intrasystematic” truths and “ontological” truths.

“The first test of truth is coherence,” he writes, “The second that truth of correspondence to reality.” Christian claims that “Christ is Lord” are true

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218 George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, (Louisville: John Knox press, 1984), 63.



intersystematically as parts of a pattern. Thus, such a statement only has meaning in a holistic context of “speaking, thinking, feeling, and acting” according to their coherence with the overarching narrative that informs them. The statement is false, however, when used in a manner “inconsistent with the pattern as a whole that affirms” the overarching narrative’s proposition. “The crusader’s battle cry “*Christus est Dominus*” for example, is false when used to authorize cleaving the skull of the infidel.” Lindbeck believes such an action defeats the truth claims proposed in the context of Jesus as suffering servant.” Thus, coherence is tested through the actions of the agent stating the proposition.<sup>219</sup>

Furthermore, such coherence is necessary to a theological truth in a manner comparable and contrasting with that of a mathematical statement. “A demonstration in Euclidean geometry which implies that parallel lines eventually meet must be false for formally the same reason that the crusader’s cry must be false: the statements in both cases are intrasystematically inconsistent.” As such, Lindbeck states that “the difference is that in the Christian case the system is constituted, not in purely intellectual terms by axioms, definitions, and corollaries, but by a *set of stories used in specifiable ways to interpret and live in the world.*”<sup>220</sup>

While Lindbeck agrees that intersystematic truth is a necessary though insufficient condition for ontological truth, he states that intrasystematic claims are possibly true without necessitating ontological approval. Lindbeck writes that an intersystematic claim is meaningless “if it is part of a system that lacks concepts or categories to refer to relevant realities.” However “it is ontologically true if it is part of a system that is itself

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219 *ibid.* 64.

220 *ibid. italics added.*

categorically true.” Lindbeck turns to a literary example to make this point. “The statement ‘Denmark is the land where Hamlet lived’ is intersystematically true within the context of Shakespeare’s play, but this implies nothing regarding ontological truth or falsity unless the play is taken as history.” I understand this to mean that the statement “Christ is Lord” can only be viewed as ontologically true if it is in fact true that the historical person Jesus in fact lived the faithful life attributed to him by the Gospels. As Lindbeck states in support of this, “A religious utterance, one might say, acquires the propositional truth of ontological correspondence only insofar as its is a performance, an act or deed, which helps create that correspondence.”<sup>221</sup>

Religious utterances “acquire enough referential specificity to have first-order or ontological truth or falsity only in determinate settings.” The statement “Christ is Lord”

becomes a first-order proposition capable (so non-idealists would say) of making ontological truth claims only as used in the activities of adoration, proclamation, obedience, promise-hearing, and promise-keeping which shape individuals and communities into conformity to the mind of Christ.<sup>222</sup>

Returning to the concept of narrative, it is important to tie the action based truth referred to by Lindbeck to the memory of Jesus’ actions in the context of the Covenant between Israel and its God, the actions of the earliest Jesus communities, and the actions of Jesus followers through history. My contention is that all of these actions are made intelligible, only through the overarching narrative of the promises to Abraham, Israel, and David. However, it is the same actions of individuals or communities that give the narrative credibility. Michael Goldberg writes that “asking about the truth of a religious story involves no more than inquiring about the sincerity of the intention of the

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221 *ibid.* 65.

222 *ibid.* 68.

one who entertains such a story to follow some prescribed source of action.”<sup>223</sup>

An agent’s intentions are informed by an ongoing account of existence that incorporates aspects of both history and memory, and peripheral existence. MacIntyre writes: “That particular actions derive their characters as parts of a larger whole is a point of view alien to our dominant ways of thinking and yet one which it is necessary at least to consider if we are to begin to understand how a life may be more than a sequence of individual actions and episodes.”<sup>224</sup> Life is less intelligible if viewed simply as a series of unconnected events, though Enlightenment thinking has supposed humanity to be better served by the rejection of any tradition or history or personal past; anything that shapes one into something other than a *self-defined individual* free of such apparent constrains.

H. Richard Niebuhr believed there is no way to make one’s self intelligible outside of the context of their shared history with a community. Individualism deters communication.

Once more we discover that visions, numinous feelings, senses of reality, knowledge of duty and worth may be interpreted in many ways. We cannot speak of inner light at all, save in ejaculations signifying nothing to other(s) unless we define its character in social terms, that is, terms which come out of our history.<sup>225</sup>

The actions of an agent, based upon the intentions formed by narratives, are identified by MacIntyre and Hauerwas, among others, as virtues. I prefer praxis.

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223 Michel Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative: A Critical Introduction*, (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), 34.

224 MacIntyre, 204.

225 H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Story of our Life” in *The Meaning of Revelation*, (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1941), 43-82; reprinted and ed. by Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), 26.

Practices embedded in communities are not only necessary to sustaining communication and relationships, but according to MacIntyre, “Also in sustaining those traditions which provide both practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context...Living traditions, just because they continue a not-yet-completed narrative, confront a future whose determinate and determinable character, so far as it possesses any, derives from the past.” He further states:

We all approach our circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity...As such, I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point. This is part of what gives my life its own particularity.<sup>226</sup>

As such, the concept of narrative and theology according to this project states, first, that the story proposed in Part One is credible in its historical and modern context. Robert Roth states of narrative qualities of truthfulness that “reality is the dramatic action of the story itself.”<sup>227</sup> Memory, writes Roth, is thus the key to reality, as opposed to how a thing is known. “If the story is the vehicle of reality, rather than either thought or sensation, then recognition, not cognition, is the way we grasp reality, or are grasped by it.”<sup>228</sup> The reality of experiences can only be translated from one age to another through narrative, providing the story with the authority to credibly interpret events. “Theology is above all concerned with direct experience expressed in narrative language.” writes Johann Metz. “This is clear throughout Scripture, from the beginning, the story of creation, to the end, where a vision of the new heaven and the new earth is revealed.”<sup>229</sup>

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226 MacIntyre, 220-221.

227 Robert P. Roth, *Story and Reality*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmanns Publishing; 1973). 36

228 *ibid.* 52

229 Johann Baptist Metz, “A Short Apology of Narrative” in Hauerwas and Jones, 252

The propositions of myth provide a...kind of statement...marked by its credibility in the story by which a culture lives. Every culture, every age, has its worldview story by which it finds meaning in the mystery of life and the world. Credibility is the criterion for these statements, just as emotive statements are measured in terms of honesty, verbal statements...in terms of validity, and descriptive statements...in terms of facticity. Credibility means adequacy to meet the need of a faith by which to live in circumstances thrust upon a given age. The importance of meaning in such credibility statements may be seen in the fact that when myths are no longer believed, the culture disintegrates.<sup>230</sup>

### **Living out the Story: Biography and Narrative as Credible Witness**

Credibility is sustained by the ongoing intentions and actions of those participating in communities of the shared story. James McClendon has written effectively about how the Judeo-Christian narrative has been made credible by the ongoing actions of individuals and communities. He uses the examples of individuals such as the late United Nations Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, the civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., Christ-centered communitarian Clarence Jordan, and the multi-faceted Charles Ives as examples of “biographical (and therefore narrative) theology as...illuminating one Christian doctrine, the reconciling work of Christ.”<sup>231</sup>

The example of Clarence Jordan provides an adequate testimony to McClendon’s thesis. Johnson was raised within the environment of the Christendom of the Southern United States. He developed an awareness of the disparity between what the Bible

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230 Roth, 55

231 James W. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today’s Theology*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), ix. McClendon has proposed similar arguments in his *Systematic Theology: Ethics*, Vol. I (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), where he uses the lives and relationships of Sarah and Jonathan Edwards as fully reflecting the Christian ethic of romantic love, Dietrich Bonhoeffer as exemplifying social ethics, and Doris Day as the embodiment of peacemaking.

stated, and the actions of his fellow congregants. This was borne out best by an event that happened during his youth, as he lay awake in bed one night listening to the screams of a chain-gang prisoner being tortured by the prison warden. “What added irony,” suggests McClendon in his biographical sketch, “was the boy’s knowledge that the administering torturer was the same Warden McDonald who only hours earlier had been lustily singing ‘Love lifted Me’ in the Baptist revival choir.”<sup>232</sup> McClendon writes that Jordan, at that time dedicated himself to attending a college where he would study agriculture and help poor farmers, regardless of race. He especially empathized with the plight of African-American farmers.

Away at college, a new awareness of the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount caused Jordan to drop out of his ROTC training. He then enrolled at Seminary and earned a Ph. D in Greek New Testament. At the seminary, he worked with other believers concerned about the plight of African-Americans, and worked closely with Black churches, as opposed to White mission projects, as a means of ministry to Blacks. After he married, he joined another couple and formed *Koinonia Farm* “where ‘suffering, sin stricken’ Southern people of both races could be taught productive farming, and where simultaneously there could be a community life based on the ‘teachings and principles of Jesus.’”<sup>233</sup> One of the principles of the farm was common ownership and full sharing of all resources and privileges. As Blacks were invited as full participants, “trouble was on the horizon from the start” in this region of the United States during the 1940’s.

As *Koinonia* grew and enjoyed some success, Jordan began preaching about

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232 Walden Howard , “The Legacy of Clarence Jordan” in *Faith at Work* April, 1970; cited by McClendon, *Biography*, 91.

233 McClendon, *Biography*, 94.

reconciliation and equality between the races, and this affected the decade old project immensely. The families of the farm were excommunicated from local churches, and the surrounding community “became so violent that it was widely reported in the national press.” It was felt by the neighbors of the farm, and the residents of the region, that the farm was “Communist inspired; professed non-capitalists and ‘race-mixers’ were a part of this Communist menace, and that it was only right to get them out of the country.” Threats, then shooting and bombings, harassment of animals and residents through the practices of “cross-burnings, building burnings, beatings and Klan caravans,” made life miserable for the farmers. Every businessperson in the county boycotted providing services to the farm. By 1968, the farm was “languishing,” and a new idea for the ministry took hold, where contributors dedicated funds to the building of a system of farm land dedicated to providing assets to the poor, without interest, and they would benefit from the community ideals that marked *Koinonia*.

McClendon picks out a number of points from his narrative sketch of Clarence Jordan.<sup>234</sup> I will recite and rephrase some of these concepts using terms more informed by my concept of Christ-centered narrative and practice. The economic practices of the farm were in keeping with Greek Testament concepts of social justice and a community of goods. Jordan’s resignation from the ROTC is in keeping with the ever-present non-violence of the Gospels’ portrait of Jesus. The public witness of farming in the wider community, and the preaching to other congregations, as well as living out, of racial equality, was certainly in keeping with the baptismal recitation of “in Christ there is

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234 *ibid.* 101-02

neither Jew nor Greek, free or slave..." There was the community's practice of love of neighbor, and of enemy. And there was an ever-present practice of voluntary sacrifice and suffering. The community endured despite tragedy and persecution.

It is only through such communitarian projects such as *Koinonia*, where the authentic embodiment of theological claims in the context of community takes place, does the claim of Jesus narratives gain credibility. It is not only in Clarence Jordan or the farm community that the gospel is made real. There have been hundreds of individuals and communities that have engendered the narrative I have proposed above. From the martyrs of the ancient Church, to those excommunicated and executed as heretics during the following centuries, the practices of public witness, voluntary sacrifice, social justice, and the love of neighbor and enemy, have distinguished the story of Jesus as credible despite the institutional manifestations of more typically oppressive interpretations of the story.

Writes Hauerwas:

It is the privilege of Christians, as well as their responsibility, to tell God's story to those who know it not. But to "tell God's story" is to put the matter far too simply. For God's story is not merely told, it must be lived. We do not respond to a story simply in itself, rather the story grasps our attention through the form of another person. The "freedom" provided by that narrative thus comes only in the form of someone external to me; it must come in the presence of another. I am the agent just to the extent I have the capacity to be called from myself by another.<sup>235</sup>

Along the lines of McClendon's proposal that individual lives are biographical "proofs" of the veracity of the Christ narrative I propose that a corporate witness more effectively renders the story credible. It is my contention that Christ-centered

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235 Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 44-45.



communities throughout ecclesiastic history, including many existing presently, are continuing chapters of the ever blossoming Christ narrative. Such communities, which John Howard Yoder and others call the “Believers’ Church, or as Yoder and McClendon have described, are “an eschatological community grounded in Scripture.”<sup>236</sup>

Such communities are distinct from congregations that are more typically products of the ethics of modern Christendom. The Believers’ Church terminology calls attention to the distinctive faith and practices of such congregations, that are intended to inform corporate practices drawn from the first-century Jesus-communities, and numerous “reformation” movements of the past. The Radical Reformation of sixteenth-century Europe and seventeenth-century England are somewhat prototypical of the more modern bodies of believers. As above, I suggest the distinctives of public witness, voluntary sacrifice, social justice, and love of neighbor and enemy, are the “marks” – the *notae ecclesiae* - of each chapter of radically Christ-centered communities.<sup>237</sup>

Yoder’s primary focus on the priorities of such communities is the totally voluntary nature of membership. Such membership is based on the spiritual conversion or conviction of adult individuals who commit, not simply to the beliefs of the community, but to being individually *accountable* to the ethics and praxis of the

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236 John Howard Yoder and James Wm. McClendon, Jr., “Christian Identity in Ecumenical Perspective: A Response to a Layman” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* Vol. 27 1990, 571; cited by Craig A. Carter, *The Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001),180. The term was originally used by Max Weber in reference to a “community of believers of the reborn, and only these.” Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by T. Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 144-45; cited by Carter, 182.

237 Though there is not space for a complete overview of the biblical texts that support such distinctive, It should be clear to the reader that these core practices reflect not only the covenantal relationship between YHWH and Israel, but are reflective of the public life and preaching of Jesus as remembered by the Gospels.

community. This stands firmly in tension with the individualism, or “freedom,” of modern society, including mainstream church congregations. Yoder writes:

Communities which are genuinely voluntary can affirm individual dignity (at the point of uncoerced adherence of the member) without enshrining individualism. They can likewise realize community without authorizing lordship or establishment. The alternative to arbitrary individualism is not established authority but an authority in which the individual participates and to which he or she consents. The alternative to authoritarianism is not anarchy but freedom of confession.<sup>238</sup>

It is imperative that such communities exist for a variety of reasons, but primarily as a remembering community which insists on living a life founded upon the Christ-narrative because it is true, despite claims to the contrary. Goldberg writes that “the Exodus story and the story of Christ carry with them the claim that they are in some basic way essentially true.” Such continuous claims by Christ-communities are “what partially justifies these stories’ putting a claim on those who hear them.” The narratives of Israel and the messianic claims of the early Jesus communities invite listeners or hearers of such proclamation to live according to the story because they believe it credible.<sup>239</sup> Additionally, such communities provide the basis for the memory of YHWH, and Jesus as Israel’s messiah, so that new generations may be taught *how to be followers of Jesus*.

Lindbeck states that to become “religious” is similar to becoming competent in a language or culture. “It is to interiorize a set of skills by practice and training. One learns how to think and feel in conformity with a religious tradition that is far richer and more subtle than can be explicitly articulated.” Lindbeck goes on to suggest that the

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238 John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 25.

239 Goldberg, 67.

knowledge gained from participation in such a community is “not *about* the religion, or *that* religion teaches such and such, but rather *how* to be” a follower of Jesus is specific ways.<sup>240</sup> The practice of particular virtues (as some would call them), or a corporate ethic, is not only necessary to sustaining relationships in such a community, but also to sustaining traditions informed by the meta-narrative which in turn provide the ethic, and individual lives, with a necessary context.<sup>241</sup>

One contemporary story-formed community that stands firmly within the Believers’ Church concept I am proposing is known as the Bruderhof. These communities are located throughout the world, but the largest are located in Pennsylvania, New York, and England. Bruderhof communities are self-sustaining communitarian congregations who live according to the principles of the “Acts Two Church.” All Bruderhof goods and resources are held in common by members, who practice non-violence, simplicity and voluntary poverty, distinct dress, common meals, full-employment, and enjoy all professional services such as medical doctor, dentist, psychiatric services and such communally. Buildings are shared by three families to each unit, with rooms being distributed according to family size and need.

Bruderhof communities are intensely focused on social justice. All meals are open to all persons from outside of the community. Bruderhof schools are open and available to children from surrounding towns. The medical care is offered free of charge to needy persons regardless of their status within or outside of the community. Bruderhof founder Eberhard Arnold wrote:

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240 Lindbeck, 35.

241 MacIntyre, 233.

When we speak of radical social revolution, of turning everything upside down, of bringing God's reign of justice, we can only do so if we are convinced that such an upheaval will affect us all quite personally...We ourselves have to be thrown over and then put back on our feet. We are all responsible for the social justice, the human degradation, the wrongs people inflict upon each other...Each one of us bears guilt toward all human kind because we are blind and deaf to their degradation and humiliation.<sup>242</sup>

The Bruderhof also follows Jesus' example of love of neighbor and love of enemy.

Arnold wrote,

No one who has heard the clear call of Jesus' Spirit can resort to violence for protection. Jesus abandoned every privilege and every defense. He took the lowliest path. And that is the challenge to us: to follow Him on the same way that he went.<sup>243</sup>

Also, he writes of love of enemies:

We should be thankful to our enemies! We have found that Jesus' command, 'Love your enemies,' is not overstated or exaggerated at all. We realize that the command of the Spirit, 'Love!' holds good for friend and foe alike.<sup>244</sup>

The Bruderhof founder also writes about the community's relationship with the empire:

When Jesus said, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's,' He was talking about money. He called money something alien, something He had nothing to do with. Give this alien stuff to the emperor, they belong together, mammon and Caesar...Let your mammon go to the Emperor, Your life belongs to God!<sup>245</sup>

Arnold addresses the Believers' Church concept of non-participation as well:

We take no active part in politics or the use of violence. We make no concessions, we refuse to get involved; but we are not indifferent. Every politician interests us, whoever he may be. And we wish everyone in politics could hear about us and realize there is a life of justice and peace, where people have joy in one another. We wish that all policy-makers might be guided by these goals and not stray to far from the way of peace and justice.<sup>246</sup>

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242 Eberhard Arnold, *God's Revolution: Justice, Community, and the Coming Kingdom*, (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 1997), 176.

243 *ibid.* 159.

244 *ibid.* 159, 160.

245 *ibid.* 169

246 *ibid.* 170.

The main aspects of the Bruderhof community are narrative in both literature and song. When asked about non-violence, the response is that “Jesus commands such a life.” When asked about living in community, members cite Scripture, and take seriously – literally – the texts that support the concept of a community of goods. Corporate singing is a constantly practiced distinctive of the community, as traditional songs for every occasion imaginable are offered both as praise and worship, and as ties that bind the community together.

At times the Bruderhof is referred to as “a Sermon on the Mount community.”<sup>247</sup> At a recent visit to the Rifton, New York community, one member simply stated that “we are a community that loves Jesus.” Most every member will suggest that forgiveness is the most important aspect of living in community. Not only the Bruderhof residents, but Yoder as well are dedicated to the concepts put forth by Matthew 18, in which the community is intent on communication, repentance, reconciliation and forgiveness. “It would be impossible to live like this,” stated Dahlia Wipf, “if we did not practice forgiveness.”<sup>248</sup>

### **Relative Status, Particularity, and Coercion: The Joy of Diversity, Identity, and Non-Violence**

The very thought that one individual, or that a community, could claim the narrative of proposed by this project as credible, would raise issues with the modern

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247 *Ibid.* 14-18.

248 All quotes or statements attributed to Bruderhof residents are paraphrases of conversations with the author during a visit to the Bruderhof community of Rifton, New York during the period of August 23-27, 2007.

conversation partner. There are the important postmodern questions concerning the oppressive nature of such claims. As mentioned briefly above, the Church is not without its substantial dark side, and it does no good for modern followers of Jesus to say their hands are clean of such persecution. The Enlightenment suggestion that all this “baggage” can be left behind at the station - never to present itself as an obstacle to fulfillment or success - has no integrity. Narrative, however, allows for the full acceptance of the past, both as an informant to the future, and as a self-critical memory of what goes wrong when a narrative is institutionalized, or appropriated as a tool for social, economic, or political advancement.

An example of the problem of rejecting a narrative’s history of oppression is one typically found among American citizens.

I may biologically be my father’s son; but I cannot be held responsible for what he did unless I choose...to assume such responsibility. I may legally be a citizen of a certain country; but I cannot be held responsible for what my country has done...Such individualism is expressed by those modern Americans who deny any responsibility for the affects of slavery upon black Americans, saying, “I never owned any slaves.” It is more subtly the standpoint of those other modern Americans who accept a nicely calculated responsibility for such effects measured precisely by the benefits they themselves as individuals have indirectly received from slavery.<sup>249</sup>

A "self so detached" from history is a self that can have *no* history and is right at home with the postmodern claim. The narrative view suggests that "the story of my life" is one embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I must accept that I am who my community is, warts of history and all. I must accept the racism or sexism or accomodationalism of my ancestors as part of my story, of who I am. MacIntyre writes that what I am is what I inherit. "I find myself a part of history and that

249 MacIntyre, 220.

is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, one of the bearers of tradition...practices always have histories."<sup>250</sup> It is a major part of the Jesus narrative that such animosity be reconciled.

I propose that since the fourth-century legalization of Christianity by Constantine, and the later establishment of the Church as the mandatory faith of the empire, the Church has been suffering from an error that has evolved into a full fledged fulfillment of postmodern assumptions. Yoder calls the error the "Constantinianization" of the Church, and believes that Believers' Church communities must disestablish the current privileged status of power-broker that it enjoys through much of the Western world. Yoder calls communities of Christ to return to "minority" status. Along with certain additional distinctives, Yoder describes what he calls a non-coercive witness to the veracity of the claims made on behalf of Jesus.<sup>251</sup>

First, Yoder does away with the phrase "truth-claim." It is just such a phrase, he suggests, that is offensive or overly theological for the critic who will levy charges of an oppressive nature or against supposed claims of infallibility. "Let us use the more biblical phrases," he writes, "'Witness' and 'proclamation' as naming forms of communication which do not coerce the hearer."<sup>252</sup> Yoder further states that the 'good news' is only good when received as such. If it is somehow coercively communicated to the uninterested or dismayed nonbeliever, it cannot possibly be received as good. The possibility of truthfulness is defeated by the aggressive imposition of one's faith upon another. Furthermore, Yoder agrees with the Post-modern assumption that both

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250 *ibid.* 106.

251 Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, Chpt. 4 *passim*.

252 *ibid.* 56.

particular and universal views are oppressive. “The reason I do not trust claims to ‘natural insight’ is that the dominant moral views of any *known* world are oppressive, provincial, and (to say theologically) ‘fallen’” There is, however, a corrective to this concern.

In fact, the Christ-communities must insist that their ethic is indeed *not intended for everyone*. The Believers’ Church stands vehemently opposed to the attempted coercive mandating of a Christian ethic upon an unbelieving world. This is necessarily part of the voluntary aspect of Christ-centered communities. “We cannot,” writes Yoder, “Do ethics for everyone.”<sup>253</sup> Not only insisting, but suggesting that non-believers participate in a decisively Christ-centered praxis is too much to morally ask of them. “Cross-bearing in the hope of resurrection, enemy-love as a reflection of God’s will, forgiving as one has been forgiven...do not make sense in the context of unbelief.”<sup>254</sup>

Such morality-legislating has been a major undertaking of much of Western Christendom, most evidently in the United States. As such, in order to participate in the political and social contexts that were targeted for the Church’s moral designs, the Church had to make its narrative relevant to the majority. Hauerwas calls this cultural assimilation. “Protestants could only assume that ‘Christian ethics’ was little different from the consensus of whatever culture they found themselves part of. This is strikingly illustrated by [mainline] Protestantism’s inability to become more than national churches.”<sup>255</sup>

Chris Heubner and others cite additional reason that a Believers’ Church witness is

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253 *ibid.* 110.

254 *ibid.*

255 Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 52.



not coercive. “Non-violent epistemology does not attempt to secure or defend the truth of its distinctive claims against all comers...Rather, it assumes that truthfulness is an utterly contingent gift that can only be given and received and that it emerges at a site of vulnerable interchange with the other.”<sup>256</sup> Such is presumed by Roth, who states, “Instead of truth’s being a right relationship between subjects and predicates...I contend that truth is finally a right relationship between persons.”<sup>257</sup> Raskin, though not speaking theologically, writes “Truth itself is also a method by which we say to others what we think we see out there or within us. We do not lie or fool the Other. Trust is trust of the Other and integration of the self, so that neither the self or the Other is deceived.”<sup>258</sup>

Also, the Believers’ Church is an ethical community that must maintain particularity to serve its purpose, which is to reflect the ongoing story of how the Creator God has been in relationship with creation, and is working in history to reconcile that relationship from a state of brokenness. While philosophical claims maintain that all truth-claims are relative, and that claims of particularity translated into universals are oppressive, the intention is that all such claims about Jesus that are proposed by the Church as credible will be rightly questioned. Yoder sees this thought pattern as a positive.

To say that *all* communities of moral insight are provincial...and that therefore we must converse at every border is in actuality a more optimistic and more fruitful affirmation of the marketplace of ideas than to project a hypothetically general insight which we feel reassured to resort to, when our own particularity embarrasses us, but which is not substantial after we seek to define it.<sup>259</sup>

The “Just War” theory, as it has evolved, is an example of this sort of breakdown in

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256 Heubner, 100.

257 Roth, 41.

258 Raskin, “Reconstruction and Its Knowledge Method” 20.

259 Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 41.

Christian ethics. At certain points in history, the witness of the Believers' Church to the particularity of non-violence as reflective of God's will for humanity has been rendered "immoral." "There is not the slightest support in Scripture," wrote Reinhold Niebuhr, "For this doctrine of non-violence...If it is made absolute, we arrive at the morally absurd distinction of giving moral preference to the non-violent power which Doctor Goebbels wields over the type of power by a general"<sup>260</sup> Yet, as stated above, the Christ-centered praxis of a community is informed by an ethic that declares, in all of its scandalous particularity, the followers of Jesus must love their enemies, and pray for those who persecute them. The narrative of YHWH is such that God has been shown to respond to evil with love, and sacrifice; not the power of empire and militarism. Only a follower of Jesus can practice such an ethic because only the Christ-follower understands exactly how credible the promise of resurrection is. And unless the particularity of the Jesus narrative is maintained, the story will suffer the loss of its claim upon credibility. Making pacifism relevant to the world at large will only serve to dilute the witness.

That this is a provincial or particular insight means not that it is relativized to the margins of conversations, but is one statement among many waiting upon justification by history. This requires patience. While most truth claims are oppressive because they seek to gain some semblance of control over how history turns out, the Believers' Church understands its witness as, not seeking a universal validation to justify its story, but views witness as the embodiment of the *hope* that history is firmly in the hands of the Creator God. Theological apologetics only makes sense if the apologete presumes

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<sup>260</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist" in Richard B. Miller *War in the Twentieth Century: Sources in Theological Ethics*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 33.

responsibility for the outcome of history.<sup>261</sup> The story of Jesus, and of a God who acts in history, only makes sense in the context of a community who lives as though its story is true. If a community does not live as though the resurrection happened, then there is no legitimate claim that it in fact did.

## What about Empire?

While it may not seem unfathomable that an economic or social structure may legitimately claim to be representative of what is best for human progress, we know that the people living within the realm of modern-age hyper-economics experience heavy doses of reality that suggest the contrary. The use of socio-economic coercion and militarism in service of expanding political or economic regimes has always worn a cloak of truth over the shadowy *reality* that there are victims left behind who had no voice in the matter. The world is full of post-colonial nation-states that are still recovering from the truth of the "white man's burden." From Southeast Asia to the Middle-East, from Africa to Central America, there are plenty of people who have something to say about the policies of liberal democracies, socialist states, and their foreign policies. It could be said that while there is something lacking in the *truth-claims* of empire, there is a tangible reality in the history of conquest and suffering that cannot be escaped by adherents to modernist thinking. Postmoderns simply appear to view this reality of suffering as something which exists solely as the result of modern universalizing assumptions, and thus suffers itself from a lack of clear answers to such a reality.

As shown in the theological narrative that begins this project, the God of Israel,

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261 Heubner, 130.

and the person of Jesus of Nazareth, were aware of the reality of empire and the challenges such entities made, and make, to the sovereignty of God. Indeed, empire has always worked to marginalize the witness of the people of God, just as it works to marginalize any claims against its own sovereignty – its own omnipotence and omniscience. Since Constantine’s legalization of the faith, the Christian Church has been operating under the assumption that the power of empire and the ethic of the Church can coexist and mutually benefit the other.

The story of Constantine, the Roman Empire, and the Church is an interesting one, if not tragic. Along the way to his ascension to the position of emperor of the Roman Empire, he took an outnumbered army toward Rome with the intention of dislodging his political rival Maxentius from power. On the march toward what would become known as the Battle of Milvian Bridge, tradition has it that Constantine had a vision. A cross, such as the ones still used by the empire for executions, was silhouetted against the sun, inscribed with the Latin *“in hoc signo vinces”* – “By this sign you will conquer.” In response to this apparent exhortation by the God of Jesus (Constantine’s mother was a follower), Constantine painted the Greek letters X and P on the shields of his soldiers, won a decisive victory over Maxentius, who drowned during the battle, and established himself as the sole authority over the Western portion of the Roman Empire.

Naturally, Constantine was now somewhat inclined toward the favoring of the Jesus communities that were in fact gathering throughout the empire. Working in tandem with the Eastern ruler Licinius, the Edict of Milan allowed for the freedom to practice nearly any religious beliefs in 313. To most leaders of the early Church,

Constantine's military victory and subsequent edict were the work of God. Along with toleration, he returned all confiscated property that was lost during recent persecutions to the communities of faith. The new emperor supported newfound appreciation for clergy, an attitude of support for celibacy on the part of women of faith, and he opposed the practice of branding slaves. Constantine outlawed crucifixion as a means of capital punishment. He financed the construction of religious buildings, lent public status to bishops, and excluded them from secular court jurisdiction.<sup>262</sup>

"Constantine described Christianity as 'the struggle for deathlessness,' that is, for that immortality assured all men by the resurrection of Christ," writes Roland Bainton. "His legislation gave to the Church privileges previously enjoyed by the pagan cults. Christian houses of worship were allowed to be restored, and the Church was empowered to own property as a legally constituted corporation." Bainton continues:

Manumission of slaves might take place in a church, as hitherto it had in a temple. The clergy, like pagan priests, were exempted from municipal duties. The laws of Augustus penalizing the unmarried were repealed, reflecting the Christians' high regard for celibacy. The first day of the week was made a holiday...[also] Constantine definitely announced himself as an adherent of the Christian faith.<sup>263</sup>

"Perhaps Christianity might have triumphed apart from Constantine's victory at Milvian Bridge," writes Maier. "Had Maxentius won instead of Constantine, the subsequent history of the Roman Empire – certainly Christianity – might have been bleak indeed."<sup>264</sup> Eusebius wrote in hindsight: "Thus, Constantine...and Licinius...both honored

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262 Philip Rousseau, *The Early Christian Centuries*, (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2002), 216-17

263 Roland Bainton, *Christianity*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company; 1964; reprint 1987). 91.

264 Paul L. Maier, "The End of Persecution?" commentary in Eusebius trans. by Paul M. Maier *Church History: A New Translation and Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications,

for their wisdom and piety, two men beloved by God – were incited by the King of kings, God and Saviour of the universe, to declare war against the two most irreligious tyrants. God proved to be their ally in a most marvelous manner.”<sup>265</sup>

There is a different reality to Constantine’s effect upon the Body of Christ than the overly positive one sketched above. Modern and ancient witnesses have been critical of the direction the Church took after legalization gave way to a certain amount of civic power that the Christians would enjoy. Under Constantine, Christ-centered communities eventually gave way to a type of culturally popular, if not culture saturated, Christendom. Suddenly, those people known for loving their enemies found coercion a palatable option. I believe that Walter Wink best expresses the fruits of Constantine and his successors (excluding Julian) by stating that

Christianity’s weaponless victory over the Roman Empire eventuated in the weaponless victory of the empire over the gospel...In the year 303, Diocletian forbade any member of the Roman army to be a Christian. By the year, 416, no one could be a member of the Roman army *unless* he was a Christian.<sup>266</sup>

Carter observes that “Christians went from being a persecuted minority [in 300] to being tolerated in AD 311, to a favored status under Constantine, to legal establishment under Theodosius, who outlawed non-Christian worship in AD 390. In AD 420...the first persecutions *by* Christians occurred.”<sup>267</sup> A body of Jesus followers that had once stood in clear tension with the machinations of empire were now walking hand-in-hand with its former persecutor. Constantine began to call himself a bishop, and claimed ordination by

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1999), 342.

265 Eusebius, 329.

266 Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 212, *italics original*.

267 Craig Carter, 167, *italics original*.

God to oversee all matters external to the Church. “Presumably,” writes Bainton, “He meant that he was not a priest and could not administer sacraments; but there was little else ecclesiastical that he was not ready to do.”<sup>268</sup>

Most famously, Constantine asserted his unquestionable authority into the most heated topic of the time, concerning the Christian articulation of Jesus’ relationship to God, the Son’s relationship to the Father. It was the Emperor who decided that the Church infighting over the matter was “disturbing the peace” of the empire. Constantine gathered bishops from throughout the Roman world, listened to them bicker and threaten back and forth in the first ecumenical council, and then settled the issue himself, refuting Arianism, whose proponents would soon be considered enemies of the state. It was prior to this that Constantine was asked to mediate the Donatists controversy within the Church, ostensibly because the matter of property and who legally owned it was at stake. His every attempt at mediation was unsuccessful, but for the first time, secular authorities were involved in Church disputes, directly in conflict with 1 Corinthians 6:1-7.

Thus, the state became an inseparable partner of the church, and *vice-versa*. Carter writes that after Constantine became revered as God’s toll of liberation, Christians assumed that God would continue to use empire to reveal what needs to be done in history. Discernment of God’s will soon becomes limited by what it appears possible for national authorities to accomplish. “The critical heresy of Constantinianism is that those living within that context expect salvation to come from nation states instead of a God

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268 Bainton, 91.

who works in history.”<sup>269</sup> For the duration of three hundred years, writes Carter, “The purpose of the Church is to confront the powers and bear witness to Christ’s victory over them, even if it involves suffering persecution, not to give credence to [empire’s] claims to be absolute.”<sup>270</sup>

Constantinianism underwrites an attitude that is contrary to the aspects of servanthood and suffering in the gospel. The political necessities of the ruler/authority are accomplished through the threat of, or outright use of, coercion. In other words, the story and particularity of Jesus is co-opted and maintained through the power of the empire (or nation state).

Yoder writes, “The only way in which the faith can become the official ideology of the power elite...is if Jesus ceases to be concretely Lord,” even over the machinations and claims of authority by empire.<sup>271</sup>

The outcome of the Church’s acceptance of empire (or nation state) as the legitimator of its existence is that those particular marks of the early church that set it apart as a called out people were now viewed as threats to the continued growth of the Church and its ability to dominate assumed threats to its new power status. Constantinianism limited the scope of the Jesus community’s public witness. There were no longer challenges to the strength of the empire, and mission outside the scope of the empire was nearly non-existent, except when coupled with political conquest. The later conversion of Charlemagne marked an era of annexation as “the name of Jesus is now intoned over a Germanic culture *without changing its inner content* (no conversion

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269 Craig Carter, 162.

270 *ibid.* 159.

271 Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 85.



experience), just as it had been intoned over a Greco-Roman culture for half a millennium before.”<sup>272</sup>

Upon Theodosius’ establishment of Christianity as the sole legal faith practice of the Roman Empire, one no longer needed to make a voluntary choice to be a member of the one-time sect. Everyone was Christian, and along with the populace came the ethics of empire and “the world.” The sectarian ethics of public witness, voluntary sacrifice and suffering, social justice, and love of neighbors and enemies became a bygone ethic that was no longer tenable if the Church were to continue in its influence over secular affairs. The Church was now an institution, and not the sectarian Believer’s Church that carried out a faithful adherence to the story of Jesus as the Savior of the World according to Jesus’ terms.

In just over a century, the Empire was playing an ever increasing role in the day-to-day business of the Church. Under the rule of Theodosius, “heretics of every sort were forbidden to assemble and their churches were confiscated; they lost the right to inherit property...Half a century later, in 438, Theodosius II issued the Theodosian Code, which inflicted the penalty of death on those who denied the Trinity (the Arians) and on those who repeated Baptism (the Donatists).<sup>273</sup>

The contemporary threat to the consistent witness of Jesus communities is the cozy relationship that exists between Western Christendom and liberal democracy. The Church has taken the nation state to be the guarantor of such “human rights” as freedom of worship, or of assembly, or of speech; and has tended to view God as

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272 Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 137, *italics added*

273 Bainton, 100

underwriting the state as the blessed vehicle for the dissemination and protection of such rights. Yet, the nation state is demanding allegiance, and establishing many contemporary practices within and without the Church, that are dedicated to the glorification of the state in a manner that falls just short of deification similar to that of the first century.

## **Conclusions**

### **The State and Church in America: Empire Remix**

After the terror attacks against New York City and Washington D.C. on September 11, 2001, the response of the United States government was a typical one. It fired missiles into Afghanistan, without of course, asking permission to use the sovereign airspace of nations that stood between the battleship and the target. The nation was in search of justice.

More interesting, however, were commercials that aired over the Clear Channel Corporation's radio programming in the wake of the attacks. Public service announcements were aired exhorting citizens to show their patriotism in response to the September 11 event by *consuming* more. "The question 'Why do they hate us so?' had to be repressed promptly and comprehensively" after September 11, writes Joerg Rieger.<sup>274</sup> U.S. citizens were emotionally drained, angry, and rightfully looking for justice after the event. The response of the empire's "town crier" was to send them shopping, and provide footage of the military response that was launched on their behalf. In the context of the marriage of Church and Empire, the "Evangelical" Christian president

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274 J Rieter, 2.

would offer prayers for Americans, but not for their enemies.

Rieger asks the intriguing question of the present Church, “Is there something in the reality of Jesus Christ’s peculiar refusal to acquiesce to empire that continues to inspire us in the broadest sense of the word?”<sup>275</sup> It is a question I believe is answered by the Believers’ Church concept that the life lived by Jesus and the practices of the “Acts Two Church” are to be considered normative for the human response to the love of God. Jesus’ challenge to Caesar, as well as his refusal to allow institutional religion to set the standards of community faithfulness, forces the Believers’ Church to view with a critical eye the claims made by liberal democracy, the historical institutional Church, and economic and military empire. Communities of Christ might seek only to maintain the distinctives that make the narrative of the Covenant God and Israel’s Messiah credible in an ever skeptical world sorely in need of a reminder of its salvation.

One year after the September 11 attacks, George W. Bush turned to Scripture to help him define the American task during his presidency. Along with a paraphrase of John 1:5, Bush used other themes drawn from the Jesus narrative in a speech delivered at the foot of the Statue of Liberty.

Ours is the cause of human dignity: freedom guided by conscience and guarded by peace. This ideal is the hope of all mankind. That hope drew millions to this harbor: that hope still lights our way. And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it. May God bless America.<sup>276</sup>

Stephen Chapman states “every citation is also an interpretation.”<sup>277</sup> Through the

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275 *ibid.* 4

276 George Bush, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020911-3.html#>; cited by Stephen B. Chapman “When Caesar Interprets Scripture” in Wes Avram edit. *Anxious About Empire: Theological Essays on the New Global Realities* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 91.

277 Chapman, 92.

appropriation of the highly christological passage from the introduction to the Fourth Gospel, Bush is equating, in unequivocal terms, the United States and liberal democracy with the salvific life of Jesus Christ. He is also stating, and not subtly, that any opposition to American values is representative of “darkness.” Indeed, Bush has a history, in the vein of Ronald Reagan (dubbing the former Soviet state the “evil empire”), of using terminology that incorporates the word “evil” to describe any opposition to American values. The nations of Iraq, Iran, and North Korea were lumped together as an “axis of evil” in a concise example of contemporary political dualism.

In truly Constantinian form, the United States is ready to use its formidable military capacity to combat such “forces of evil.” In September of 2002, the Bush administration published *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*,<sup>278</sup> and the document stated in certain terms that the threat of terrorism called for a new era of American international policy. Robert Bellah interprets the preamble of the document as such:

America will strike any nation or any group that it deems dangerous, whenever and however it feels necessary, and regardless of provocation or lack thereof. America invites allies to join in these ventures but reserves the right to act with or without allies. No nation will be allowed to surpass or even equal American military power, and indeed other nations are advised to limit or destroy any “weapons of mass destruction” they may have...apparently only because we can be trusted to use them justly...On top of the declaration of absolute military supremacy throughout the globe, the document reiterates, in the epigraph to section 3, Bush’s intention to “rid the world of evil” - first uttered on September 14, 2001. Apparently what even God has not succeeded in doing, America will accomplish.<sup>279</sup>

Free-market economics shares space with democracy as the chief exports of the

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278 George W. Bush *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* reprinted in full in Avram, appendix, 187-215.

279 Robert N. Bellah “The Likely Consequences of the ‘Bush Doctrine’” in Avram, 22.

American enterprise. The *Security Strategy* states, “Economic growth supported by free trade and free markets...reinforces the habits of liberty.”<sup>280</sup> One bullet point of the section on economic growth seemingly disregards Canada and most of Europe’s socialized economies by stating support for new taxation policies, “Particularly lower marginal tax rates.”<sup>281</sup> In promoting the growth of a universal economy, Bush cites the World Trade Organization as a primary partner of the American effort. Along with ridding the world of the evil of terrorism, Bush intends for American supported agencies to rid the world of the “evil” of socialized economies, though promising “rules flexible enough to allow developing nations to gain access to critical medicines for extraordinary dangers like HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria.”<sup>282</sup>

Toward the end of the *Security Strategy* document, Bush turns to the American national narrative to underwrite the evolving militarism of the age of terrorism. “Terrorists attacked a symbol of American prosperity,” reads the epigram of Section IX. “They did not touch its source. America is successful because of the hard work, creativity, and enterprise of our people.”<sup>283</sup> This quote leads to assertions of the necessity of military might to protect the American standard of living. The United States, suggests Bush, must “dissuade future military competition,” deter any perceived threat, and “decisively defeat any adversary if deterrence fails.”

The presence of American forces overseas is one of the most profound symbols of the U.S. commitments to allies and friends. Through our willingness to use force in our own defense, and in defense of others...the United States will require bases and stations within and beyond Western Europe and Northeast Asia, as

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280 Bush “Security Strategy” in Avram, 201.

281 *Ibid.*

282 *Ibid.* 203.

283 *Ibid.* 212.

well as temporary access arrangements for the long-distance deployment of U.S. forces.<sup>284</sup>

From such policy I conclude the following suggests the reality of the early twenty-first century world. The Western world, led by the United States, displays every characteristic that is evident in empires of the past, with one unique twist. The American project is founded upon the belief that the United States represents the new model elect, the new “chosen people” of YHWH. This is the legacy of the Puritan ideal of the New England settlements, and has continued for centuries. The stories of American progress and success have always included the idea of divine providence; especially in the support of military endeavors. In reality, the mantra has always been, “America vs. Evil.” Perhaps the popular World War II era song sums it best - “Praise the Lord, and pass the ammunition.”

Yet, I have shown above that YHWH, and the divine revelation of human normativeness in Jesus, stand firmly against the reality of empire in any form. The United States, similar to its predecessor empires in England and much of Europe, has tended toward commandeering Church approval of the tactics of empire, including the militarization of evangelism efforts, where the institutional Church forced conversions of conquered peoples and firmly supported abhorrent agencies such as slavery and genocide. The Believers’ Church must provide an alternative to the institutional Church of empire, and provide a credible continuation of the Christ-centered narrative as evidenced in radically faithful communities of the past and present. Faithful congregations of Christ must insist upon reflecting the praxis of Jesus communities of the past and present that publicly witnessing to the peace of Jesus Christ as the

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284 *Ibid.*

salvation of humankind.

History has shown the universal claims to truth have not been salvifically efficacious. As nation states of various types have attempted to use Enlightenment ideals to bring peace and liberation to the masses, both socialist states and liberal democracies have continued to challenge the status of a Creator God who promises to deliver humanity from bondage – despite empire. Religious stories have been marginalized, or manipulated to conform to Enlightenment ideals of truthfulness, and the institutional Church has responded by eschewing marginalization and accepting the standards of empiricism, and empire. Both Church and State have decided upon coercion and militarism as the only answer to evil – and as the appropriate means to enforce the “truth.”

Yet it is marginal status that lends credibility to the claims of Christ. A community that sacrifices and suffers voluntarily, and survives *despite* attempts to discredit and suppress it, is the most credible witness to the ministry of Jesus, and the resurrection of the dead. In the shadow of empire, the Believers’ Church’s loving embrace of both neighbor and enemy, its embrace of the “other,” and its practice of social justice as the command of God instead of a humanly formulated philosophical good, will in the end be vindicated by history as guided by the Creator God. If there is a battle that the Church is legitimately engaged in, it is the battle for reality. Writes Rieger:

The complex and transdisciplinary reality created by empire (a reality that cannot be limited to religion, politics, economics and so forth) finds a stumbling block in the complex and transdisciplinary *real* of Christ. The battle between reality (the commonly accepted version of the way things are, upheld not by a correspondence to a referent in people’s lives but by power) and the *real* (that which has been pushed below the surface and repressed in the formation of the

dominant version of reality) is as uneven as any battle between dominant and repressed forces: reality seems to win every time. But where the dominant view of reality intersects with the repressed view of the real, things will never quite be the same. The real of Christ...not only holds up a mirror to the reality of the status quo but also creates a christological surplus that cannot be captured by this reality and thus points beyond it.<sup>285</sup>

The Believers' Church is charged with making real the faith and practice of Jesus Christ. Just as Rome executed the Judean claimant to Caesar's throne, God established that claim by resurrecting him in vindication of faithfulness. The Believers' Church makes the claim of Messiahship, monarchy, and resurrection credible by living as though resurrection is the reliable promise of a covenant God.

Such a proposal is bound to be "pushed below the surface" of the empirical world, unevenly matched against the tanks of Stalin, the excesses of Mao's Cultural Revolution, the Atomic Bomb, or the free-market need to dominate world resources in order to feed the appetites of empire. Love of neighbor does not feed the empire. Love of enemy might fail in securing a well-fed future for the political and economic elites. Yet the faith of Jesus Christ reveals a Creator God who desires that human beings feed their neighbor, and their enemy. (Rom. 12:20) Through the obedient faith of Jesus, humanity is welcomed into relationship with the Covenant God, and shown in Jesus the kind of life and praxis that facilitates the salvation of human communities. According to the narrative of communities of Christ, the story of empire and Enlightenment are proven inadequate. The foolishness of the cross of Jesus Christ emerges as the final arbiter of history.

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285 Rieger, 10



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