Historicity, Hermeneutics, and the Historical Jesus
Millicent C. Feske

The Mary and Martha Story
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In the Shadows of Auschwitz
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Introduction

Faith, Histories, and Our Lenses

Since second grade, I have worn glasses with corrective lenses. Without my glasses, the world looks like a Monet painting, filled with fuzzy brushstrokes of light. Recently, I have begun wearing bifocals, which aging has made necessary for reading and close work. As I put my glasses on daily, I thank God that the world pops into sharp, sensible focus once again.

We view reality through lenses all the time. Our lenses, however, come from our experiences, our heritages, our histories. Who we are shapes how we see and what we see. Because different people view the world necessarily through different lenses, we cannot agree upon one objective notion of reality. Reality is at least as subjective as it is objective. We may well find ourselves better able to discuss among ourselves how we can grapple with understanding truth than to come to an agreement over facts, especially facts regarding history and faith.

The articles in this issue of Quarterly Review approach several faith concerns from the varied perspectives of persons with different histories viewing reality through different lenses.

Millicent C. Feske urges us to see that the labors of history and christology can be attempted by the church only in the midst of our ongoing relationship with the God shown to us in Jesus of Nazareth. There is neither an objectively historical Jesus whom we can meet today nor an objectively true christology; only “the kerygmatic process of encounter between the Jesus-traditions of church histories and the present day situations of Christian communities.”

Traci West helps us to look at Jesus’ encounter with Mary and
Martha in Luke 10:38-42 through the lens of feminist biblical interpretation so that we might better understand the answer Luke was giving to what question of his day, as well as how the text might speak to us in the midst of the questions we carry in our time.

Stanley J. Menking offers us a summary of the interactions of the four main generations alive today: the Xers, the Boomers, the Silents, and the GIs. He then proceeds to help us see more closely spiritual needs, challenges, and gifts through the lenses of Generation X.

Henry F. Knight carries us into the darkest shadows of the Holocaust against the Jews and demands that we speak of God only after we have looked through the lens of the one-and-a-half million children slaughtered by the Nazis. How can we understand and talk about the God revealed in the burning bush to Moses and to what does kind of covenantal relationship might that God be calling us?

Nancy R. Bowen also takes us through a look at the lectionary passages dealing with the Exodus of the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. But she would have us look at these passages through the lenses of the Egyptians and of modern-day Palestinians, as well as through those of the writer of the Hebrew text.

Each of these articles challenges us to look at reality through someone else's lenses. They will provoke us to view life and faith in uncomfortable ways. But they will also cause us to ponder whether our ordinary lenses need adjusting because of the insights gained from someone else's lenses.

Gary L. Ball-Kilbourne
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Fargo, North Dakota
The fact is that every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.
—Borges

Life is a struggle to evolve, not an attempt to avoid wounds.
—William James

One of the most perplexing puzzles I encountered as a seminary student in the 1970s was the claim that Christianity was inextricably connected to the particular, actual, first-century person Jesus of Nazareth, but that such historical knowledge is nigh-unto impossible to obtain. We need to know the Jesus of history, but he is no more available to us than any other historical figure except through our own interpretive efforts. Biblical scholars and pastors and theologians have been trying to solve this riddle in a variety of creative, thoughtful, and faithful ways since the end of the eighteenth century. Yet many Christians find themselves instinctively drawn to

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know more about Jesus, the historical person—who he was, what he did, what he said. In an intermediate-level Christology course that I teach to undergraduates, my students often sign up for the course expecting—even hoping—that this will be a class that will give them information about the “real Jesus.” Theologians have the same tendency. Much of the most provocative and challenging theological literature of the late twentieth century purports to base itself on historical claims about Jesus' identification with the poor and his egalitarian relationships with those on the social margins.

In addition to believing Christians, secular culture has a fascination with Jesus as a historical figure, as testified to by the popularity of “Jesus” as cover articles for such mainstream magazines as *Time*, *Life*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*. Feature films that offer interpretations of the first-century Jesus, even when they are interwoven with literature and fiction as *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Jesus of Montreal* are, generate enormous controversy and debate, suggesting the importance of historical claims to people's understandings of both Jesus and the church. Newspapers run coverage of the latest activities of the infamous “Jesus Seminar,” careful to headline what appears—at least at first glance—to be particularly egregious or outlandish. Public television produces careful documentaries on the latest scholarly findings, while crowds flock to see the Shroud of Turin. We are not absolutely sure what we are looking for or what to do with what we may find, but we have a sense there is something fundamentally important in the historical evidence about Jesus of Nazareth.

In the nineteenth century, a “Quest for the Historical Jesus” emerged as scholars began to apply the tools of scientific historical research to the biblical texts. The discrepancies between the gospel accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—always a part of the church’s awareness, even in the earliest centuries—revealed the “fingerprints” of the individual human author. In an environment where truth was defined as “that which we can prove,” these variances provoked the inevitable question, “Will the ‘real’ Jesus please stand up?” The disastrous, if self-revealing, results of the original Quest were biblical scholarship’s attempt to answer that question with finality. As Albert Schweitzer noted with alacrity and no little sarcasm in 1906, these so-called “empirical” portraits of Jesus resembled no one so much as their nineteenth-century authors. The attempt to illuminate the first-century Jesus seemed a dismal failure, and the project fell into disrepute.
Yet attempts to understand something of Jesus "as he actually was" continued to surface among biblical scholars and theologians through alternating periods of intense interest and scholarly skepticism. At the present time, investigating Jesus of Nazareth as a historical figure is again a respectable, if still disputed, undertaking in the theological academy.

However, there is another, more fruitful manner of construing the relation between christology and Jesus in history. In this essay, I will proceed in the following manner: first, I will identify the legacy from modern theology that I take to be of primary importance for christology's engagement with a historical Jesus; second, I will reconstruct, using contemporary theory, what it means to read history in general; and third, I will examine two contemporary christological projects that deal with the issue of Jesus in history. In conclusion, I will claim that christology is not just the explication of the essential identity of Jesus as Christ but a practical activity taking place between the Jesus traditions and the communities that claim his name.

**Jesus as Kyrios**

The authoritative power of the name of "Jesus" as "Christ" within almost every Christian community cannot be denied. Throughout most of Christian history, the relationship of Jesus to the church could be summed up in the phrase Jesus is Lord. Although interpreted variously, to say "Jesus is Lord" has meant that Jesus as sovereign is in some way authoritative and definitive for Christian existence. However, christology itself, as a theological discipline, has been besieged in recent years by a variety of critics, both within the faith and without, who are concerned about atrocities—past and present—committed in the name of Christ. These scholars raise a radical challenge to many of the ways in which christology has classically been construed. They question emphases not only on the lordship of Christ but also on the maleness of Christ; Jesus' suffering and death as the heart of Christian redemption; and the finality, ultimacy, and uniqueness of Christ. From a variety of perspectives they argue that christology must be radically reconfigured if it is to serve the church in a world of ethnic, political, social, and religious particularities.

Even while bearing these searing critiques in mind, however, it is
not enough simply to cast off “Jesus is Lord” for some other, less offensive phrase. What is at stake here is the recognition of the very real power and authority that the “name of Jesus” does hold within Christian communities and the integrity of the relation between the appeal to that name and the use of power. Furthermore, the manner in which the name Jesus authoritatively functions indicates as much about his identity as any statement about him, either historical or narrative. Refusal to acknowledge either the very existence or the actual manner of this functional authority is, in a sense, a surrender of christology into the hands of those who would abuse its power and a denial of a fundamental relation as Christians. Christians necessarily must ask, then, not “Who was Jesus” but what does it mean to call ourselves followers of Jesus as Christ? What does it mean to be responsible witnesses to this name?

This returns us, then, to the question of the historical Jesus. As I have noted above, almost all Christian communities in some way or other acknowledge the centrality of Jesus as Christ (Lord, kyrios) to their identity and practice of the faith. And to recognize Jesus (the first-century individual) as Christ requires attention to his historical life and death. We are only too painfully aware of the (empirical) difficulties and (theological) dangers the conjunction of these two claims entails. However, I want to suggest that the life and actions of Jesus, properly conceived, are vitally important to the liberating witness of Christianity today.

The Legacy of Modern Theology

I begin, then, by identifying a twofold legacy from modern theology that I consider crucial to carry forward into christological formation in our time and the relation of that legacy to the issue of Jesus in history. First, modern theology teaches us to read critically the received traditions about Jesus. It tells us that we can use the texts to ask the kinds of questions that are being raised here. It teaches us that these texts are themselves part of a traditioning process that addressed the material questions of particular Christian communities to the available narratives about Jesus in an attempt to reconstruct their own vision for living in the world. Thus, for example, Mark writes about a suffering, dying savior who criticizes the twelve disciples and condemns the Jerusalem Temple to his church, which is left leaderless after the
horrors of the Roman-Jewish War of 66-72 CE. John tells Jesus' story as one of darkness and light, outsiders and insiders to his community struggling with rejection by the synagogue and with the task of forming a new non-Jewish Christian identity. And the household codes of the Pastoral Epistles reveal the rifts within early Christian churches debating the inheritance of Jesus' remarkable ministry to and with women. This legacy of interpretation and integration is, in and of itself, a liberating word. Indeed, during my years as a seminarian, my response to all my former pastors was one of unmitigated fury: they had all had the same training I was receiving; why hadn't they shared this wonderful information with me?

The problem with the modern project, however, was in thinking that critical reading meant that there was only one way to read the text. Even the early church was not so stringent in its views. Origen (ca. 200 CE) and Augustine (354-430) both developed elegant systems of different "levels" of meaning in scripture. Medieval theologians drew upon these ancient methods of exegesis to seek four meanings in each passage.

Although Christianity has always held the early, received traditions recorded in the Bible to be of special significance, it has never agreed upon the exact nature of that significance. The historical Jesus project itself is an example of the wide range of opinion about the use and interpretation of the texts about Jesus' life and death. But the project failed, in a sense, not because of that diversity but because of its attempt to read empirically texts that are not empirical accounts. It asserted that the only way we could be connected to the historical personage of Jesus of Nazareth was by defining history as the attempt to isolate a verifiable (and, it was later discovered, infinitely receding) identity for Jesus that would stand for all time.

Most importantly, the quest for the historical Jesus abandoned the essential insight that critical reading of the received traditions about Jesus (that is, reading informed by responsible study and defended by rigorous argument) is, in and of itself, a fundamental act of christological praxis. Thus, I wish to argue that the primary instinct of the modern quest for the historical Jesus was correct: that the critical reading of the received traditions about him is vital to ecclesial formation and practice. But the quest did not recognize that the act of reading the text in the context of the community is itself, as a historical act, the act of christological practice. To assert that this is all we have is not a negative statement about the boundedness of all
human enterprises but one affirming the activity of God's revelation in the midst of finite creation.

What I wish to do then is to reconfigure the historical Jesus conversation through a revised understanding of what the word *history* means. That is, I want to suggest that when we say that something is "historical," or we state that such-and-such provides a "history" of a person or events, we are not simply implying an account of impartial, empirical facts; we are describing a process of interpretation and self-critique. To do this, I shall call upon the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, who provides a manner of historical understanding that can, I believe, be appropriately taken over into the discussion of how one uses historical texts for contemporary theological construction. Gadamer's *Truth and Method* is a massive critique of the modern notion of method in philosophy. By "method," he refers specifically to the scientific paradigm of empirical truth as the only truth available to us. Even aesthetics has not escaped such a criticism, he makes clear, because aesthetics has taken as its starting point the assumption that the object/subject split is a real one.

Gadamer provides a trenchant criticism of what Richard Bernstein calls the "Cartesian anxiety": the need to ground all our knowledge in supposedly empirically verifiable "facts." Gadamer demonstrates that such thinking is fallacious. How we understand is not through the collection of "objective information" but through the projection of worlds of discourse and experience upon texts—projections which, in the engagement with those texts, disclose particular truths. These truths are then subjected to criticism and correction by other worlds and by the texts upon which they are projected. Gadamer's project asserts that we reflect and act necessarily only within these "worlds" of practice and discourse that not only limit our perspective (the negative prejudice that modern theology intended to remove) but also give us a positive locus of operation, a sense of "position" or "location" materially productive for theological reflection. In other words, the very particular and differing places in which we find ourselves in the world make it possible to say something specific and concrete about our experience of God in the world. The purpose of reading historical texts, then, is not to isolate a set of timeless essentials—either concrete or metaphysical—but to bring about the production of ourselves and the constitution of communities of ongoing conversation about our proper relation to others and to God.
Jesus for Us

There is a second strand of the modern theological project, especially as it has sought to interpret Jesus of Nazareth, that is crucial to retrieve: Rudolf Bultmann’s contention that who Jesus is—the primary identity of Jesus—is Christ pro nobis, Christ for us. This, too, is a liberating word. It reminds us that the heart of christology is soteriology—that is, the relation between Jesus who is called Christ and human beings in history is fundamentally one of freedom, salvation, and grace.

There were two problems, however, with the way Bultmann’s “Christ as salvation for us” was originally conceived. The first has to do with his assumptions about the constitution of the theological “for us.” Bultmann’s enterprise is one that speaks primarily only to the dominant theological subject. The confrontation by Christ, in Bultmann, is the crisis that calls for a decision for or against authentic existence before God. Authentic existence can, and I contend must, be interpreted to refer to the full conditions necessary for human flourishing. But unfortunately, for Bultmann and his interpreters, it came to be correlated instead with the inner life of the middle-class individual searching for ultimate meaning in a world infected with anomie and for distinctive identity in a world of encroaching pluralism. These are important questions. But they become secondary if the basic requirements for survival and growth remain unmet: nutritious food, adequate shelter and clothing, personal and communal safety, education, access to genuine political participation. Thus, while Bultmann attempts to speak of freedom, his perspective on the nature of that freedom is severely limited by the subject he assumes and addresses. In our own time, however, it is inadequate for the “for us” of christology to be limited to this dominant theological subject. Rather, it must be expanded so that “Christ for us” is Christ for and from the perspective of the whole world, and in particular of those who have suffered history rather than written it.

A second problem in Bultmann’s reading emerges from his struggle with the failure of the historical Jesus quest. In Jesus and the Word, Bultmann makes clear his interest in the flesh-and-blood Jesus of history by rendering him in his first-century Palestinian milieu. Yet, in his attempt to avoid the pitfalls of the historical Jesus project as the production of an empirically verifiable persona, Bultmann borders on rendering the soteriological event almost contentless. The lack of
specificity about the nature of “authentic existence” as salvific is a
direct result of Bultmann’s failed attempt to avoid projecting his own
persona onto the face of Jesus. Bultmann had the brilliance to see the
problem of the historical quest (the impossibility of empirical fact
about Jesus), but he did not have the philosophical tools to offer a
different sense of historical understanding that would enable us to
generate the Jesus of history in another, more productive manner.

Two Contemporary Historical Readings

Two contemporary christological readings will illustrate my point.
Both concern themselves—though in quite different ways—with the
issue of Jesus in history and its relation to christology as soteriology.
What I wish to explore in these short descriptions is not whether we
can find a “historical Jesus” in the way of the old or new or any other
“Quest” but rather whether we can talk with integrity about the
“Christ for us” from particular positions in human history and
society. To this end, I shall explore the work of Jon Sobrino, a Jesuit
theologian from El Salvador, and Richard Horsley, a contemporary
U.S. biblical scholar. Each has quite different emphases and speaks
differently about the “history of Jesus.” Both share a clarity about how
their particular locations in the world shape and are shaped by the
work of interpreting the traditions about Jesus of Nazareth.

The world of discourse of Latin American liberation theologies
operates in the questions Richard Horsley has brought to the issue of a
Jesus not of history but in history. Horsley’s Jesus and the Spiral of
Violence: Popular Resistance in Roman Palestine draws on
contemporary research on the nature of preindustrial peasant societies
to give a fresh reading of Josephus, other fragmentary accounts, and a
number of particularly problematic New Testament gospel passages.
His aim to consider Jesus in relation to the question of violence/
nonviolence is stated directly in the opening section of the book,
which is a discussion of the structural nature of violence in oppressive
societies and of the tiered nature of violent retribution.

Horsley is not so much interested in the creation of a portrait of
Jesus as in the consideration of him as a figure shaped by and shaping
the milieu of which he was a part. The debate over the advocacy of
nonviolence over violence with regard to Jesus is revealed to be a
naïve differentiation in a society strafed with violence and caught in
the grip of hierarchical power politics brutally enforced. "Violence," as pejorative, is identified by Horsley as a term defined by the ruling class for the maintenance of social boundaries that benefit those who control a hierarchical power base and whose own violent behavior is self-designated as defense or national security.

The realm of God preached and enacted by Jesus in this context is not a spiritualized heaven but the use of power to liberate in a social-historical way. It is a power understood to be "already present and active among the people" with whom Jesus associated. Horsley's reading of some of the gospel traditions about Jesus renders him as one who refuses to participate in the politics of violent, hierarchical power and as an instigator of egalitarian social relations—relations that threatened the familial structure of first-century Palestinian peasant society. Horsley also appeals to a consideration of "apocalyptic" as a political term offering hope to an oppressed people in history, indicating their belief that God did indeed have the power to intervene and restore a just reign. He does so in order to interpret Jesus' limiting of his manifestations of God's reign to the social realm. And in so doing, he shifts the primary locus of salvation away from either Jesus' execution on the cross or a realm hereafter to within God's created order. Jesus, then, is considered primarily in relationship to and in continuity with his own people's worldview and situation as a colonized and oppressed peasantry, trapped in a web of escalating violence.

Although Horsley's essay does not lack substantive content and opinion regarding Jesus, I would argue that its methods and conclusions are a fundamental diversion from the former "Quest" projects. In his rereading of both Josephus and some of the gospel passages, Horsley seems particularly sensitive to what feminists already have learned via the work of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and others—that written records are the deposit of a literate middle- or upper-class social strata and that canonized collections represent more often the views of the victors of a political battle than any theological consensus. Thus, Horsley reads for the underside of texts, surfacing possible power struggles and class conflicts. What emerges as primary positive features of Horsley's venture, then, is not just his substantive portrait of Jesus' social relations and their political repercussions but also his methodology. Invoking the perspective of the suffering subject of human history and projecting their world upon the received texts, Horsley's project functions for us after the manner of Gadamer's
description of the act of interpretive history by asking and answering
the question, When we look at the gospel traditions from their
underside, from the viewpoint of those who have suffered history,
what do we see?

Sobrino’s Jesus as a New Kind of History

Jon Sobrino may be regarded as a transition figure. His early book,
Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach, is
heavily influenced by the modern theology and provides a survey of
many of the prominent christologies produced within this paradigm.
Yet, Sobrino’s work is important to a postmodern discussion because
of his powerful rhetorical appeal to those for whom the “for us” of
christological construction must be.

Sobrino’s appeal to an “actual history” of Jesus, and in particular to
the crucifixion, is his attempt to call into question the use of the power
of Jesus’ name to justify ideology, even the ideology of the church.
Yet this is not what is different or remarkable about his project.
Rather, Sobrino recasts from the particular perspective of those on the
underside of the contemporary social order in Latin America those
who must be the “for us” in our formulation of Christ savior pro
nobis. Because his guiding principle is the liberation of the Latin
American poor, Sobrino’s work is a sometimes odd and sometimes
glorious conglomeration of points from the modern “historical” quests
and from social-historical readings. He remains preoccupied with
Jesus’ self-consciousness and works with the modern dialectical
dichotomy between the “Jesus of history” and the “Christ of faith.”
Yet his situatedness on the margins of traditional history continually
pushes him to acknowledge the idolatry incumbent in any attempt to
name Jesus totally or to discern the full reality of God.

Sobrino compares his christological method with that of the New
Testament writers. Christology is “elaborated from two poles,” one
being Jesus of Nazareth and the other being the situatedness of the
particular community in question. This understanding of history to
which Sobrino appeals is more holistic than that of modern quests,
reintegrating the political and social with the religious. Sobrino uses
the theological concept of incarnation to his advantage, appealing to
history as the medium and source of the “situated demand” of
God-in-Christ-crucified, a recognition of the contextual nature of all
theological ethics. He argues persuasively for a historical christology by shifting the categories with which christology will be done from the ontic (traditionally the categories of dogmatic theology) to historical ones such as “conflict, temptation, and ignorance.”

Yet if we are to accept Sobrino’s presentation as a historical reading of the Jesus traditions, we must do so with a fundamentally different sense of the word history. His historical reading of the Jesus tradition is more narrative than it is exegetical argument. Words of the post-Easter Jesus appear frequently in the mouth of his supposedly “historical” Lord. Some of his most compelling passages are his readings of redactions of the gospel writers (which reflect Jesus in relation to historical concerns of their own times) rather than attempts to speak about Jesus in relation to the historical parameters of his (that is, Jesus’) own time. Sobrino himself, however, does locate a critical nexus for Jesus’ historicity—at the cross. Here Sobrino makes his fundamental epistemological break with modern theology.

The cross of Jesus and the crucifixion of Latin America’s poor become, for Sobrino, a location from which “to reformulate all the important problems of theology . . .” from the vantage point of the underside of received histories. Sobrino rejects the dichotomy between theory or systematic theology on the one hand and praxis or practical theology on the other. “The particular symbol [of the cross] forces us to change our way of living as well as our way of thinking,” he writes. Chrstological theory, then, arises out of the specific praxis of the Latin American poor engaging the narratives of Jesus in history at the tangential point where the received Jesus traditions meet the questions of survival, hope, and justice raised by their context of oppression. What emerges is not an essential identity but a historically rendered construction; a portion, not a totality; an image of Jesus already in the process of being reformulated by a new or nuanced question—the question of the poor in history. The history of Jesus is, thus, continually resituated both in the context of the whole of the received gospel traditions and that of these new hearers, who “know” this history by attempting to follow him within the parameters of Latin American poverty and repression.

Here the distinction between narrative and factual history begins to lose its pressing urgency. If Jesus of Nazareth is never finally or fully reachable, then all our language regarding him is, in a sense, narrative. Sobrino, with his naming of a new theological subject, radically redefines the salvific function of “Christ for us” in our time as the
creation of the conditions necessary, as he says, for “human possibilities [to] be realized concretely in oppressive situations.” And he puts forth a suggestion that “history” itself may be something different than what we have, in modernity, considered it to be.

**Jesus, History, and Social Praxis**

What do these projects suggest to us about christology as a practice in our time? Eduard Schweizer has argued persuasively regarding Jesus in history that once we say Jesus is Christ, we also acknowledge that Christ is Jesus. It is out of this faith claim that the details of Jesus’ life take on crucial significance. This has been the impetus of the historical Jesus movement since its inception, even at its most mistaken moments. But, at this juncture, I would argue that our discourse about the relationship between a “historical” Jesus and the faith and life of the church must make, indeed is making, a fundamental shift in locus and meaning. Christology, rather than being the explication of a once-for-all identity or a persona of the Jesus of history as Christ, must be recognized as a historically contingent activity taking place in an intricate matrix of the pressing questions of a particular community, the received Jesus-traditions, and contemporary tools of analysis: social, political, and so forth.

That is to say christology is shaped by our own questions, because Jesus as Christ is, by that very name of Messiah, Anointed One of God, Savior, the one to whom we direct our concerns, queries, prayers for salvation. It is formed through intimate study of the stories of Jesus that have come down to us, because the church has always recognized the Bible as the primary source of information about the identity and ministry of Jesus, as well as about the early church’s proclamations about him. And it is informed by the tools of human understanding available to us—the contemporary version of Wesley’s “Reason.” Because our questions and our tools for reading and understanding can change and grow, so also our perception of what it means to say “Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ of God” will certainly also change and grow. And while the book that bears his words and stories may seem to be the single fixed entity in this process of interpretation, it is important to remember that biblical scholars continue their work of searching for the most accurate and reliable texts and translations. It is a task that may never be entirely
completed. The continual sifting and intertwining of these three elements make christology a process rather than a product.

History, then, is also redefined: it is as much an activity as it is a fixed past. Contemporary interpreters ask the question, how is the relation of Jesus to persons and groups in his own time of value to us? This question contains two submerged issues. One is modern theology’s search for an objective epistemological base outside the contingencies of history. Traditionally theologians and biblical scholars have used the question of Jesus and history as an answer to this dilemma. With such an agenda it seems perfectly logical that repeated attempts be made to explicate the essence, the central core, the nature and person of this Jesus. What is continually ignored in such ventures, however, is the radical historicity of all human perception and expression, even to the point of recognizing the historical particularity and conditionedness of the very form of that project itself. Such an explication of the task of historical Jesus scholarship also implies some further, less obvious assumptions about the subject of theology, the conception of the self, the nature and practice of the church, and most importantly, I think, the maintenance and use of power.

The quest of the historical Jesus fell into disrepute because scholars recognized the impossibility of the objective historical task with respect to Jesus of Nazareth. Many located the difficulties of the project in the limited nature of our sources about Jesus rather than in the nature of subjectivity and language themselves. Thus, their earlier failures might suggest the extraction of a “Christ of faith” as the rejection of a fallacious search for a Jesus of history and an attempt to affirm the ongoing faith and life of ecclesia. This Christ of faith is also problematic, however, for it is the obverse of the Jesus of history. It, too, seeks safety beyond historical contingency and can function also in the service of centralized power-brokering due to the easy manipulation of its inner contentless core.

Theologians who are listening to the voices of a new subject of theology located on the outer edges of such centralized schemata have sharply rejected any such division between history and faith. There is a readier recognition on the part of such authors of the inescapable circularity of the christological and larger theological process. There is not and never was any “pure” Jesus of history who was recognized by his followers as the Messiah of faith and whose life, words, and work are deemed significant and necessary for the faith and life of the
ongoing church. Rather, for those who consider relation to Jesus as Christ to be crucial for Christian life and thought, it is necessary to accept the risk of historical accident and the unceasing historical process of communal and personal identity formulation.

In such a process, christology is moved from a front-and-center position to a space between the Jesus traditions as they have been received, studied, reported upon, analyzed, and considered in their own milieu (which includes the context not only of first-century Palestine, but of the churches that reformulated their own received traditions in the light of pressing concerns) and in contemporary historically situated Christian communities. In the gap between these two, Christ and christology emerge not as a finally definable entity but as the subject of this peculiarly Christian praxis. What emerges is not so much a persona as it is what Peter Hodgson has called a Gestalt of Jesus\(^\text{46}\)—one that is already in the process of being reformulated. The crucial point is that christology is recognized as irreducibly entwined in the web of history such that no image of Jesus is understandable without reference to the concrete context in which it was shaped.\(^\text{47}\) This is the crux of a search for a historical Jesus.

The christological question, then, is not, “Who is Jesus?” the question concerned with ahistorical essence and foundations; nor is it a matter of “How can we co-opt the Christ for liberation,” which manipulates the authoritative power of the name of Jesus by absolutizing a contextually appropriate but historically limited perspective. Rather the appropriate question for our time is, “What does it mean to be a Christian community in a world of massive social and psychic suffering?” Here we see a convergence of christology and ecclesiology, for it is the peculiar praxis of relation to and dialogue with Jesus as manifested in past histories that is the identifying mark of Christian community. When the interpreted history of Jesus abuts the identified concerns of a particular, situated community, a new space is opened up in which christology and ecclesiology mingle and shape one another.

The fundamentally social and communal nature of such a process calls upon theology to reconsider Jesus of Nazareth in relation to his social/cultural milieu, that of the militarily dominated Galilean Jewish peasantry of first-century Palestine. For we find that what is necessary for our time is not a “historical Jesus” who turns out, in truth, to be a metahistorical Jesus but a Jesus who is immersed in and constituted in the midst of his particular sociopolitical era—that is, a Jesus looked at
and listened to in relation to the pressing issues of his own people in his own day: the conditions of hierarchical social and political dominations. This Jesus offers twentieth-century scholarly and ecclesial praxis a reintegration of the religious with the political and the social and a recognition of the crucial interplay of faith with history. In reference to such a Jesus the realm of God becomes historically manifest, though never totally realized. Because it is inherent in the finite nature of human being and language never to be able to comprehend or express the totality of even another finite being, we can never attempt to name Jesus in his human essence. Who he is for us, Jesus’ “self,” emerges as the product of a communal historical encounter as do all human identities. The image of Jesus as the Christ that emerges from any historically situated matrix space, as Karl Rahner reminds us, carries with it its own transcendence. Yet, the inability to grasp the entirety of Jesus’ being does not preclude the ability of christology to function as a critique or norm. If peculiar to Christian identity is the praxis of christology, then it is the appropriate function of this praxis to say “yes” and “no” to specific ways of being in the world.

Risks of History/Wounds of Life

The relation of Jesus to his history and to us in our histories, then, is not as an inaccessible “object” bounded by dead or unavailable facts but is instead better understood as a contextual historicity that offers the means for continually “doing a new thing.” The limits we experience in this fundamental ecclesial practice of engaging the Jesus texts out of our own particularities may be regarded, following Rebecca Chopp, as “access points to broader horizons of understanding.” Such a perception is filled with risks: the risks of misconstruals and partial insight and the risks incumbent in seriously integrating the socialpolitical with the religious. These risks are the wounds modern theology has sought, unsuccessfully, to avoid in its search for an objectively verifiable Jesus. But being serious about history in theology means a never-ending breaking and reformulating of ourselves in relation to the Jesus given through our received histories, from the positionality of our own worlds of discourse. It involves a kerygmatic claim that the God of Jesus of Nazareth does act in the cracks and contingencies of human lives.
Christian identity and unity, connected inextricably with the unity and well-being of the entire planet, its peoples, creatures, and eco-system, is rooted, then, in a relation to Jesus of Nazareth that manifests itself in the historically contingent nature of the theological process. There is not, in this view, the earthly Jesus, on the one hand, and the church’s kerygma on the other. Rather there is the kerygmatic process of encounter between the Jesus-traditions of church histories and the present-day situations of Christian communities. The New Testament contains not “kerygma” but kerygmas, not a “pure” proclamation any more than a “purely historical” Jesus, but it does contain the actual formulations of the meaning of Jesus for the ongoing life of real communities of his followers. “History,” then, is not what happened but something that we do; christology is the ongoing praxis of the ecclesia in relation to Jesus in his and our histories; and theologizing is the doing of history in the faith that God acted definitively in Jesus, thus making the relationship of Christian life to his life of ultimate significance for us.

Notes


3. As clearly as anyone, John P. Meier articulates the difference between the “real Jesus,” which he describes as the “total reality of that person [Jesus]” (p. 21), and the “historical Jesus,” the figure who may emerge from scholarly investigation of the extant sources. See Meier, “Basic Concepts: The Real Jesus and the Historical Jesus,” in A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Anchor Bible Reference Library vol. 1, (New York: Doubleday, Inc., 1991): 21-40.


5. See, for example, The Atlantic Monthly (December 1986), Time (August 15, 1988), and Life (December 1994), in which cover stories about Jesus’ historical


8. Tatum provides a brief introduction into the ways in which Christian authors from as early as the beginings of the second century grappled with the differences between the four Gospel accounts and provided theories on their origins and offered theological arguments for the necessity of four different Gospel accounts. See his notes on Papias of Hierapolis, Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, and Augustine of Hippo, pp. 12-17.

9. I thank the students of Fred Craddock's senior seminar in preaching the canonical Gospels (Spring 1980, Candler School of Theology) for this turn of phrase.


11. Christian theologians who raise questions about the function of Christology as it

12. The concept of sovereignty itself has come under scrutiny by theologians of the marginalized who question the hierarchical despotism of any central figure, even Jesus. See, for example, above: Daly (1979), Ruether (1981), Trinidad (1984), Brock (1988).


20. Thus, while the examples I will discuss are part of what might be labeled a “third quest” of the historical Jesus, my argument is intended not to extend to all the projects that might be grouped under that rubric but rather to argue the possibility of speaking with honesty of “the historical Jesus” when such discussion is viewed in a methodologically viable manner.

21. See, for example, Horsley, 165.

22. Ibid., 156ff.

23. Ibid., 20ff.

24. Ibid., 170.

25. Ibid., 168.

26. Ibid., 190.

27. Ibid., 209ff.

28. Ibid., 232ff.

29. Ibid., 129ff.

30. See, for example, Schüssler Fiorenza’s discussion of the New Testament.

31. For a more current and nuanced christological argument, see Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), in which he describes as “a more systematic development . . . of what I have written in *Christologia desde América Latina* (Mexico City, 1977). . . .” p. 275, n. 14. I have chosen to limit my comments to the earlier text because it is here that Sobrino most fundamentally challenges the modern notion of what we understand “history” to mean.

32. While Sobrino’s desire to ground dogmatic Christology in a “history of Jesus” might first appear as a peculiarly modern, rather than a postmodern project, it is important to locate Sobrino’s project within the context of the historical practice of the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America. The power of the name of Jesus has primarily functioned there as an arm of the church in support of Latin American authoritarian regimes. Christology in this arena has been primarily an ahistorical philosophizing upon classical doctrinal formulations which at best has fostered theological stasis and at worst has functioned as a tool of active oppression for the encouragement of submission.

33. Sobrino, p. xix.

34. Ibid., 38ff.

35. Ibid., 13, 87, 89, for example.

36. Ibid., e.g., 47ff., 92, 369.

37. Ibid., e.g., 124, 214.

38. Ibid., 360.

39. Ibid., 102.

40. See, for example, Sobrino, 101.

41. Ibid., 226.

42. Ibid., 230.

43. Ibid., 234-5.

44. Ibid., 47.


46. This idea was first brought to my attention by Peter Hodgson in a brief excursus on Hegel’s christology, American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting (Boston: 7 December, 1987).

47. See, for example, Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).


The Mary and Martha Story: Who Learns What Lesson about Women and Ministry?

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:38-42)

Whether we are engaged in lay or ordained Christian ministry, we would probably agree that a demonstrated commitment to Jesus should be a defining component of our work. But how is this to be expressed? The conflict between Mary and Martha in Luke (10:38-42) seems to highlight this very question. In this narrative, Jesus indicates his preferences to the two women about what actions are truly needed.

We would also probably agree that Christian ministry, whether it is carried out by women or men, includes exercising power and authority.
that is based on the mission and ministry of Jesus. To help us authentically emulate his example, we often look to scripture texts such as this one. When we focus on interpreting this passage to clarify its relevance to issues of ministry, we immediately notice that the two central characters who receive advice from Jesus are both women. The passage seems to reveal specific intentions that Jesus has about the empowerment of women who dedicate themselves to him. He makes a pronouncement about what is never to be taken away from one seeking to properly exhibit her faithfulness.

Now, to fully comprehend this pronouncement by Jesus, we need to examine each woman’s role in this scene and the nature of the conflict between them. This effort yields a rich and provocative—though not systematic—crop of ideas concerning women and the setting of priorities in ministry. The passage can be understood as offering a particular message not only about how women are empowered by Jesus but also about what the implications of that empowerment are for their exercise of leadership in the church. More broadly, it can provide guidance for all ministers (regardless of their gender) on how women should be valued and treated in the life and ministry of the congregation.

But this text cannot be understood without taking into account the social norms of the historical period when it was written, the sex-role presumptions within the narrative, the sexual politics of the early church, and the particular intentions of the Luke-Acts author. Each of these vantage points adds a different nuance to the meaning of this gospel scene. They must be carefully probed in order for us to draw conclusions about the messages concerning women and ministry that emanate from this story. Of course, we as interpreters also influence the meaning of the text, since our interpretation will reflect some of our own social presuppositions about women. As we explore the relationship between text and context, we will both unravel and become entangled by the various webs of meaning that we find.

Feminist Insights into Biblical Interpretation

To immerse ourselves in a thorough exploration of what the scene with Mary, Martha and Jesus tells us about women and ministry we need to reflect on its “original” message to those in the early church setting. In this task we are immediately confronted with the need to
consider the role of men in shaping the tools for the discussion. It is necessary to be cognizant of the ways that gender dynamics infuse the process of biblical interpretation centered on women characters, from the earliest steps in that process. As literary biblical critic Averil Cameron has put it, any contemporary discussion of women in early Christian documents such as Luke 10:38-42 enters a context of “male textuality.” The texts were written by men in the context of a society in which education and literary production were primarily male prerogatives. Female characters were the product of male, not female members of early Christian communities. In addition, when interpreting the Mary and Martha characters, we must try to separate the task of understanding what men thought of women and prescribed for women in ancient antiquity from the task of understanding the actuality of women’s lives in the early Christian movement.

Moreover, when we are describing women in antiquity, we must be more circumspect in our use of the expression “the role of women.” “The role of women” can evoke a static understanding of women while assuming a complex, varied, and active understanding of men. When we get caught in this logic, we cease to view women as actual participants in and contributors to history. Instead, we understand them as passive recipients of roles given to them by men or by some entity we vaguely refer to as their “society.” For example, when preaching a sermon, think of how absurd it would seem to point out “the role of men” in the early church. Yet it is considered quite legitimate to comment on Luke’s view of “the role of women” in the church. When we summarize the ancient historical context of the Bible, we must exert a conscious effort to locate women as subjects rather than as passive objects.

These admonitions should indicate that it will not be easy to mine the story of Mary and Martha for a message for and about women. Our interpretive tools are inevitably somewhat inadequate for reconstructing how the women who surrounded the author of Luke truly lived their daily lives. But we must not get so discouraged or overwhelmed by the methodological hurdles which have to be faced that we decide not to engage these women characters in our learning, teaching, and preaching.

These feminist considerations guide the following investigation of the sociohistorical landscape of this passage. They simultaneously place women at the center of our reflection and require us to focus attention on the process of gathering relevant historical information.
Locating the Sociohistorical Realities of Women’s Power

To understand Luke’s intentions as he depicted Mary and Martha, it would be helpful to understand a little about the lives of women in his social setting. During the first few centuries of the Common Era in the Greco-Roman world, women’s lives were severely restricted on the basis of their gender. In general, women were subject to the control of men. Daughters were subject to their fathers, wives were subject to their husbands, fatherless daughters were subject to their father’s male relatives, widows were subject to their own sons, and of course women slaves were subject to their masters. Yet it should be kept in mind that most men were also under the control of other men.* There was a rigidly hierarchical social and political system in the Greco-Roman society which forms the setting for the Lukan Gospel writer.

However, drawing further conclusions about the cultural milieu of the author is trickier than it appears. Like our society, the first century comprised multiple dominant and subcultural influences; and the particular traits of each one cannot easily be isolated into separate categories. Hellenistic, Roman, Egyptian, and Jewish influences coexisted within Luke’s society.

Many biblical historians teach us to draw our conclusions about women in the first century from a comparative approach of women in various cultural subgroups. For instance, Ben Witherington divides his examination of women in first-century cultures into three groupings: women in Hellenistic culture, women in Roman culture, and women in Judaism. He then compares and contrasts the relative freedom of women in each of these groupings of the Mediterranean world. He contends that Roman women had a higher degree of freedom with respect to education, property, and marriage rights.5

Since Christianity began as a movement within Judaism, it is most useful to try to gain some understanding of women’s lives within Judaism. For his description of women in Judaism, Witherington relies primarily upon the Mishnah (codified around 200 CE). He explains that Jewish women were generally quite restricted. Laws of inheritance, betrothal, and divorce were heavily biased in a man’s favor. In Jewish law, unlike in Greek and Roman law, a husband was permitted to take the life of his wife if she committed adultery.6 Nevertheless, his study also includes the considerable evidence of significant rights as well as respect enjoyed by Jewish women in...
Jesus’ day. Women did have some religious privileges and functions, though they were limited mainly to rituals performed in the domestic sphere.

In less recent scholarship one can find some overly simplistic comparisons between “Jewish women” and “Christian women” in antiquity. Ministers who were taught this dualistic cultural analysis tend to contrast restrictive ancient Jewish customs and laws with liberal Christian practices. Texts about Jesus’ encounters with women, such as those found in Luke, are sometimes heralded as evidence of early Christian feminism which arose as a critique of Jewish sexism. What this premise ignores is that for much of the first century, most Christian women were Jewish. A dichotomous view of Jewish and Christian women during this period is simply inaccurate.

Moreover, as a method for helping us to thoroughly assess the constraints on women’s lives in Luke’s society, even comparative approaches such as Witherington’s have problems. For one, the Greco-Roman world, particularly in its urban locations (the probable setting of the Luke-Acts author) may have been too amalgamated for such sharply drawn distinctions among Jewish, Hellenistic, and Roman social practices. Early Christian writers like Luke existed in a world where cultural influences were complexly interwoven.

Secondly, the comparisons between cultural groupings of women are based on sources that are often too dissimilar. As biblical history scholar Bernadette Brooten has cautioned, comparisons of women in the New Testament vs. women in Judaism (based on the Mishnah) vs. women in the Greco-Roman world are methodologically unsound. The New Testament is a compilation of differing literary genres; for example, narratives, letters giving specific instructions to Christian faith communities, and a visionary account of a revelation. The Mishnah represents writings by a particular school of rabbis attempting to respond to current conditions facing their community rather than to offer a historical account of those conditions. Furthermore, the widely ranging sources used by scholars to describe women in the Greco-Roman world are most often representative of a particular cultural elite. Using this range of sources to compare the realities that women faced is like comparing apples, peaches, and oranges.

When depicting Jewish women’s lives during this historical period, it is also important to take note of evidence that challenges common assumptions about the comprehensiveness of their subordination.
Apparently, a few Jewish women of the first century not only exercised a high degree of freedom and independence but they also held positions of leadership and status. The following two examples of feminist research document reasons for broadening our view of the hold that patriarchal authority maintained over women in the world of the Luke-Acts author. Using non-literary evidence (inscriptions), Brooten concludes that some women were leaders of synagogues during the Roman period. Brooten has located inscriptions where women bear the titles “head of synagogue,” “leader,” “elder,” “mother of the synagogue,” and “priestess.”

Research on women synagogue patrons adds more detail to arguments that emphasize the power and leadership of women in ancient Judaism. Historian Matthew Collins suggests that “women were often patrons of the synagogue, with the implication that such patronage carried with it the influence, honor and leadership roles for female patrons, just as it would have for male synagogue members of such means.” He acknowledges that though women evidently did function as patrons, they comprised only a small percentage of the overall patronage system.

Again it is important to stress the limitations of these scholarly efforts for giving us insight into the “everyday” realities of women’s lives. Evidence of wealthy, upper class, women synagogue patrons is clearly not representative of the power and authority exercised by most Jewish women. Similarly documentation of women’s synagogue leadership based on nineteen inscriptions scattered across several geographical areas and a few centuries is probably not indicative of most women’s participation in the life of ancient synagogues. However, these examples do help us to challenge sweeping generalizations about the rigidity of patriarchal restrictions over women’s power and leadership.

This limited sketch of the sociohistorical background should at least suggest a varied, rich, and even contradictory cultural milieu. Women were subject to the authority of men. Yet a few women also exercised authority over men (even publicly!). The Greco-Roman context of the Gospel of Luke provided a variegated mixture of dictates affecting women’s lives. Reconstructive work on the precise experience of power and authority by women in antiquity will always involve a high degree of speculation.

Furthermore, this exercise of sorting through historical material demonstrates how difficult it can be to recognize the qualities that
characterize women's religious leadership. In any century, it seems that tremendous amounts of cultural baggage cloud and obfuscate the labeling of women's work and influence as significant, especially in the religious arena.

The Interpreter and the Text: What Lesson Does Jesus Teach?

During Jesus' visit with the two sisters, Mary is listening to Jesus. Martha is "distracted" by many tasks and asks Jesus to instruct Mary to help her. Jesus chides Martha for being "worried and distracted," explaining, "There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42).

This is not only the concluding line of the passage; it is the "punch line" of the passage and has elicited much attention from scholarly commentators. What exactly does Jesus mean by this admonishment of Martha? Precisely what is it that Mary has done right and Martha has done wrong?

Though interpreters offer an array of responses to these questions, there seems to be a general consensus that Jesus is making the point that Martha has failed in some way while Mary has achieved something important. Interpreters disagree as to the precise content of the sisters' actions or the behavior that merits either criticism or praise. But we must also address the question of what social assumptions about the women inform the work of the interpreters.

According to Joseph Fitzmyer, while Mary is the ideal disciple, Martha's failing is that she is consumed with the domestic sphere. Yet, for Fitzmyer, Martha does so in order to honor Jesus. The reason for the rebuff is that Martha wanted to honor Jesus with an elaborate meal, but Jesus is reminding her that it is more important to listen to what he has to say. The proper service to Jesus is attention to his instruction, not elaborate provisions for his physical needs. What is not made clear in this interpretation is whether Mary's behavior is ideal for a woman disciple or for all disciples. We would expect that Jesus requires a bit more than sitting and listening in other instances where a Gospel character's behavior might deserve to be labeled as ideal discipleship—wouldn't we?

Martha's error is also described in terms of her failure to respond to the spiritual needs of Jesus. A discussion of the passage, by Wilhelm
Wuellner and Robert Leslie, offers this emphasis and uses a psychological framework. For them, Martha’s concern for hospitality blinds her to “an urgent personal need.” She is preoccupied with getting a meal and ignores the special need that Jesus has “for someone to listen to him in a concerned and uninterrupted way.”

Mary, of course, offers the converse model. She listens to Jesus at a time when he needs a friend “to whom he could pour out his soul and get a concerned, sympathetic hearing.” We must ask about the extent to which this interpretation of Mary reflects modern gender assumptions about women’s special capacity for conversations with emotional depth. Would the same interpretation be offered if a male disciple were featured here instead of Mary?

For others, this passage should be understood in connection with the various stories in Luke about the women Jesus encounters on his journey. As Jane Kopas asserts, when we make this connection, it becomes clear that this passage “reveals to us a fuller picture of the thoroughness of women’s commitment to discipleship and Jesus’ acceptance of their participation.” Martha is faulted not for doing many things and worrying about many things but for “failing to root her actions in a basic awareness of why she does what she does.” To use a trendy, contemporary expression, Martha is not “fully in touch with herself.” Mary, on the other hand, sufficiently integrates all the activities of life. Mary listens to Jesus in order to develop the single-mindedness necessary to achieve this integration with even more acumen than she now possesses.

Some would say that Martha’s complaint to Jesus is so aggressive and insolent that the lesson she must learn is about correcting her “bad attitude.” Paul Minear maintains that Martha’s work is “diakonia,” which would clearly be recognized by Jesus as a legitimate form of discipleship. If that is the case, Jesus’ response to Martha is not so much related to the content of the work that she is doing as it is to her disposition. Minear explains, “Jesus’ rebuke was a protest against her petulance and narrowness.”

Many are convinced that the controversy, and thus the key message of this passage, focuses on the traditional, expected, feminine role of working in the kitchen. For instance, to Robert C. Tannehill, Martha’s problem is that she is too immersed in domestic duties. Martha erringly places her emphasis on fulfilling the “expected role of a woman serving dinner” In listening to Jesus, Mary “neglects” her feminine responsibilities. However, these kinds of assertions should
lead us to ask about whether the definition of women’s “expected role” is derived from a modern or an ancient context.

Discussions that peg the central import of the passage on the domestic role of women are usually framed in the context of Jesus’ affirming treatment of women. Interpretations such as Eugene Maly’s even seem to place Jesus in opposition to Jewish traditions in order to clarify the intentions of Jesus. Maly says that Jesus’ treatment of Mary is revolutionary in light of religious laws and customs of the Jesus community. According to this viewpoint, Jesus apparently admitted women as well as men into his circle of disciples, which was a practice unheard of in rabbinc circles. In Maly’s framework, “Martha is chided not for what she was doing, but for wanting Mary to perform only the traditional tasks committed to women.”

But positing in the mind of Jesus a distinction between the traditional and nontraditional behavior of women in relation to housework seems quite anachronistic. To portray Jesus as a typical 1970s United States feminist might “preach well,” but it distorts first-century sociohistorical realities too much. Specifically, Maly engages in the type of Christian apologetic that I mentioned above, which represents a false cultural dichotomy between Christians and Jews of the first century. The effort to show that Christianity is liberative of women by positioning Judaism as its opposite can encourage toxic, anti-Jewish attitudes among Christians. One can hear this attitude, for instance, in the work of G.W. H. Lampe, who wrote in the 1950s Peake’s Commentary. He explains that Mary, the “ideal disciple,” has chosen the good portion, while Martha is typical of Jewish leaders in being preoccupied with minutiae. This kind of interpretation raises the question of whether the Martha and Mary passage reflects Luke’s problem with Judaism or whether this interpreter is reading stereotypes about Judaism into Luke. It seems like the latter.

What prompts the rebuke of Martha by Jesus? Her bad attitude? Her overly zealous concentration on work? Her insensitivity to Jesus’ urgent personal need to talk? Her choice to give priority attention to physical nourishment? Her desire to be traditionally feminine and to force Mary to join her? Whichever problem the interpreter has chosen, it is concluded that Martha has done something wrong. What prompts Jesus’ commendation of Mary? Whether she is a model of mind/body/spirit wholeness, a compassionate listener, or at least an
attentive repository for religious instruction, she has, in any case, done something right.

Based on this listing of Martha's failings and Mary's supposed attributes, we can, of course, glean proscriptions which enhance our concept of ministry. But we do so relying upon the views of interpreters who are deeply mired in their own cultural biases. As we attempt to extract meaning from the passage, the sorting out of the cultural assumptions about Judaism and about gender roles that belong to the interpreter must not be ignored. To determine what is needed for Christian ministry based on gospel passages such as this one, the layers of cultural presuppositions about gender have to be probed and challenged. (Yes, "even" gender assumptions about male characters have to be ferreted out in our interpretations.)

Moreover, this simplistic right-and-wrong scenario perpetuates what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza calls "the good woman/bad woman polarization." When our criteria for ministry is based on this type of interpretation, it is created out of the fabric of women role models, but at the same time it is conceived through the pitting of one woman against another. Unfortunately, the sense of rivalry and disrespect that taints our conclusions may be inevitable because Martha initiates these problems in the text. But we need to also ask ourselves if the Luke-Acts author might have deliberately created the women characters this way. If that is the case, we must try to ascertain why he might have done so.

Luke's Lessons about Women and Ministry: Then and Now

When this text is placed in the context of early Christian congregations, Luke's motives become the focus of attention and displace the stress on what's wrong with Martha. Since this story occurs in Luke alone, it is particularly important to investigate Luke's agenda for including it.

Although there is conflicting evidence about the nature of Luke's message to early Christian congregations contained in this passage, its clearest implications for those congregations revolve principally around issues of gender, power, and ministry. On the one hand, this story can be construed as an instructive model for women affirming their importance in the early Christian community and/or promoting new, liberative roles for them. On the other hand, this text may have
been written explicitly to subordinate women’s ministry in Luke’s early church community. By exploring arguments on each side, we can draw some conclusions about the task of constructing a message about women and ministry to Christian congregations of the first century as well as to those of the present time.

**Toward the Empowerment of Women**

The fact that this scene centers on a meal may give essential clues about the issues in the early church that the Luke-Acts author seeks to address. If we begin by reflecting on the Lukan theme of the meal within the broader context of the gospel narrative, we realize that the way this theme is emphasized in the Mary and Martha story confirms the significance of women’s discipleship. As E. Jane Via explains, “the etiquette of the meal is Jesus’ model of authority.” Jesus’ statements during the Last Supper regarding what it means to serve help to illustrate the use of this theme (Luke 22:27ff). Lukan redaction inserts into the Last Supper scene the disciples’ dispute over who is the greatest among them. Jesus asks them whether the one who is serving or reclining is greater. Apparently, in the customs of Jesus’ cultural context, the one reclining would be the one who is greater, because the one reclining would be the host or hostess who owns the household, provides the food, and owns the servants. Jesus has reversed the social etiquette because he has been serving the bread and the wine. He instructs the disciples that their authority should be modeled after his example.

When this information is linked to Martha’s serving role in the Mary and Martha story, the message to the early Christian congregations becomes clearer. In the Mary and Martha passage, preparation of the meal and hearing of the word converge. Hence, this story presents the image in the early Christian ritual of the meal. As Via insists, the Mary and Martha pericope demonstrates that “the meal should be joined with the hearing of the word, but of the two, hearing the word is the better part.”

According to this view, Luke intends to represent women as fully enfranchised in relationship to both the meal and the hearing of the word. This enfranchisement is especially powerful when understood in the context of the ancient Christian community’s ritual practices. Luke might be addressing a problem that has arisen in the community concerning the separation of worship from the meal. The separation occurred because earliest Christians worshipped in the synagogue, yet
celebrated the Christian meal in homes. Among other related consequences of this separation might have been a tendency to begin to exclude women. The need for the preparation and service of the meal may have been used as a rationale for the exclusion of women. This story responds to some of these problems. In this paradigm, the story confirms the discipleship of both Mary and Martha, thereby offering a mandate for the inclusion of early church women in a Christian ritual that unites both the word and the meal.

We may also look at the nontraditional roles of the Mary and Martha characters as an aspect of Luke's support of women. The strength of this approach depends upon how gender roles are defined in the cultural context of the Luke-Acts author. Pointing to ancient Jewish restrictions related to the education of women as well as to the serving of meals to men, some argue that this story is a deliberate attempt by the Luke-Acts author to justify and support the full inclusion of women in significant roles in the early church.

A common assumption among interpreters is that Martha is acting in accordance with a socially acceptable, prescribed female role. Witherington is one author who counters this assumption in his articulation of a women-affirming position on this pericope. He agrees that Jesus is breaking cultural taboos by coming to a woman's house specifically to teach her and by being alone with two women who were not his relatives. However, Witherington adds the controversial claim that Martha's actions, as well as Jesus', were culturally unusual.27 The claim is supported by the explanation that women were not allowed to serve meals if men were present (unless there were no servants to perform the task). Martha's uncustomary actions reflect her desire and willingness to serve even if it meant assuming a servant's role. Martha breaks the taboo of serving in mixed company while performing a traditionally female role. While Jesus and Mary are seen as breaking the usual customs regarding the educating of women, note that this approach recognizes that this deviation is not completely unheard of in their setting. Even scholars such as Witherington acknowledge that women could attend synagogue and become quite learned if their husbands were rabbis. Nonetheless, in this framework, Luke's central intent with this passage is to explain to his early Christian audience how the teaching regarding women's full participation arose and applies to them.29

Whether the focus is on teachings about the Christian ritual of the meal or on community practices regarding gender roles, both
approaches come to the same conclusion. The author’s purpose is to prevent the erosion of women’s power in Christian communities. Therefore, the passage conveys a mandate by Jesus for women’s inclusion in key roles within the faith community. Also, to differing degrees, these analyses minimize the conflict between the women in their messages about women and ministry. We learn the same lesson about women’s empowerment from both women instead of recognizing the message only when the women are pitted against each other. We learn lessons about holistic Christian practice based on the merging of the hearing and doing of the word, which the combined acts of these two disciples illustrates. Or we learn lessons about taboo-breaking Christian practice based on the similar behavior of Mary and Martha in the breaching of cultural customs in order to honor the presence of Jesus.

These lessons are instructive for our contemporary context. In one instance, the unifying analysis of the women’s actions in this story urges attention to the inculcation of injustices based on gender within our church rituals. The church is called to grasp the significance of ritually displaying women’s authority and power in the joint “hearing and doing” of religious practice. For effective ministry, our efforts to guard against implicit injustices to women need to be located in all ritual practices, whether the practices involve prayer at church business meetings, scripture invoked at hospital bedsides, or weekly worship services. Our language, whether spoken, sung, or written; our church symbols, whether stained-glass windows or portraits in the narthex; our use of contemporary or traditional texts, and our choices about leadership at church-sponsored ceremonies—all need to affirm and include women in a conjoined fashion that relates word and praxis. The ritual aspects of ministry can uniquely combine the “hearing and doing” of the Word. Therefore, it is especially important for us to include examples that exhibit women’s power and authority in the images and activities that inform our ritual life.

The other interpretation of Luke’s message for the church that hinged on the identification of social attitudes toward women provides a slightly different lesson. It encourages monitoring and countering the ways in which broader discriminatory cultural definitions of what is considered women’s work seep into our religious practices. An ethic of cultural taboo-breaking is offered by this model, where all the members of the gospel scene are perceived as dispensing with some restrictive, gendered expectations about behavior. In accordance with
this model, we are to recognize one of the ongoing tasks of the church as deliberately incorporating practices that break prejudicial mores about women. Congregants need to encounter ministry that distinctively challenges negatively biased assumptions about women's work which they are exposed to in their daily consumption of popular attitudes and institutional practices. When, for example, the child-rearing work of black mothers who need public assistance ("welfare") is either rendered invisible or demeaned as intrinsically morally degenerative, we ought to encounter an ethic that distinctly breaks down that assumption in the church arena.

Promoting the Silencing of Women

This passage can also be interpreted as sending a message that has exactly the opposite of a liberative intent for women. The Luke-Acts author may have written it to subdue and silence the women who made up a considerable portion of its first audience. For example, Mary Rose D'Angelo adamantly maintains that Mary and Martha were actual ministers of the early Christian mission. In her view, the Lukan story "attempts not only to denigrate them personally and to restrict women to a passive role but also to subordinate the ministry of the table to the ministry of the word." This assessment traces the theme of restricting and belittling women throughout the Gospel of Luke. On several occasions, when women are addressed by Jesus, they are in some way corrected by him (e.g., Luke 11:27-28; 23:28). Since Martha is engaged in the ministry "of the table" and Jesus corrects her, she is just another example of the chastising way that Jesus relates to women. Mary's role illustrates the converse of this theme. D'Angelo asserts that the women "who most fully win Jesus' approval in Luke are Mary . . . and the repentant woman (7:36-50), neither of whom says anything at all." According to this framework, Luke uses this passage to instruct and edify women in the early church; it is meant to restrict them to passive roles and to teach them to keep quiet.

Schüssler Fiorenza offers the most exhaustive feminist analysis that demonstrates Luke's intentions to restrict and silence the apostolic women of the early church. She points out that Luke does not narrate a single example of a woman preaching throughout Acts, though he, of course, knew of women leaders such as Priscilla (Acts 18:26). In a startling corrective to almost all previous interpretations, she notes
that nowhere in the pericope is the kitchen mentioned. Almost without exception, when this passage is preached or exegeted, it is simply assumed that Martha is in the kitchen concerned with traditional feminine duties of cooking. Every time that assumption is preached or taught, contemporary social biases are being projected onto the text.

The text does not indicate that Martha is in the kitchen and serving a meal, but as Schüssler Fiorenza explains, Martha is "preoccupied with 'diakonia and diakonein,' terms that in Luke's time had already become technical terms for ecclesial leadership." Luke does not cast Martha in the role of performing traditional housework. Rather, it is women's ecclesial leadership that Luke concertedly subverts with this text. Women in Luke's community were leading and proclaiming the word in house churches. Luke may present male and female examples of serving and hearing the word in Luke-Acts, but he presents only male examples of speaking the word. From this view of the passage we learn that Luke is specifically prescribing a restrictive role for women in the church.

The need to note the correcting of women by Jesus in the narrative context and the encoding of the technical term for ecclesial leadership in Jesus' rebuke of Martha prods us toward the same conclusions about women, power, and ministry. They serve as critical reminders of the ways that tradition can be used to subordinate the ministry of women. From these insights about Luke's silencing intentions comes a warrant for activist attention to the dynamics of deliberate acts of sex discrimination in our churches. An ability to openly oppose the ways that tradition may be selectively invoked and distorted to subvert women's leadership in the church is a crucial ingredient for ministry. Moreover, from a recognition of the subjugating theme in the depiction of Mary and Martha, we learn a lesson about the need to avoid making tradition synonymous with God. Effective church leadership must vociferously proclaim God's opposition to efforts to subordinate and demean women. We must do so especially when those efforts are launched from within the church!

This conflicting discussion of the relationship of the text to its context of early Christian congregations raises challenging questions for us. Does the Luke-Acts author of this passage have liberative or oppressive intentions in relation to women in his ancient church audience? Does the message of this passage hinge upon determining the actual circumstances of women's leadership in the early church?
Because of the scarcity and androcentric nature of the sources, we will never be able to recover fully the reality of women’s lives in the first century. Still, if we diligently sort through and reflect on historical and interpretive materials, we can move forward purposefully. Equipped with this contextual work, we can adequately reconstruct the key dynamics that shape the meaning of the text. Conflicting interpretations that yield differing ethical lessons should be viewed as enriching rather than immobilizing. The reconstruction process need not generate identical ethical mandates as long as they are consistent with God’s justice and compassion for human creation.

We will have to keep returning to the interplay between the scripture text and its varied contexts in order to discern the lessons to be learned about women and ministry that emerge from scripture passages such as the story of Mary and Martha. As we use these scriptures to develop our ministries, it is impossible to eliminate the snarled, obstacle-laden process of learning that will be involved. This struggle is required of us if our ministries seek to embrace the ethical goals of honoring the human worth and dignity of women and of truthfully engaging human community realities. And the struggle must continue.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted in the text of the paper, all references from the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version.


6. Ibid., 3-6.


9. Jewish biblical scholar Adeline Fehribach points out that the Mishnah was compiled at the end of the Jewish-Roman war to reorder their world after the destruction of the Temple. She asserts, “What the writers of the book described was that they wanted the world to be, not necessarily the world as it was.” “Between Text and Context: Scripture, Society and the Role of Women in Formative Judaism,” in Recovering the Role of Women: Power and Authority in Rabbinc Jewish Society, ed., Peter J. Haas, ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 43. See also Brooten, “Early Christian Women,” 79.


16. Ibid.


22. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Theological Criteria and Historical Reconstruction: Martha and Mary, Luke 10:38-42,” Colloquy 53 (Berkeley, CA: Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, GTU and UC Berkeley, 1987): 5. Schüssler Fiorenza’s chapter on Mary and Martha in But She Said is an expanded version of this paper which she gave in Berkeley. I refer to both texts indiscriminately throughout my essay because the contours of her argument are identical in both texts.
24. Ibid., 44.
25. Ibid., 58.
26. Ibid., 59.
27. For a vehement critique of Witherington that disputes his claims about Martha's untraditional activity, see Adele Reinhartz, "From Narrative to History: The Resurrection of Mary and Martha," in *Women like This: New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World*, Amy-Jill Levine, ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 164-6.
29. Ibid., 100.
31. Ibid., 452.
33. Ibid., *Theological Criteria*, 7.
My secret is that I need God." This is the cry that is expressed near the conclusion of Douglas Coupland's third novel, *Life after God*. Written in the first person, this novel portrays the journey of a young adult Xer, a member of the “first generation raised without religion.” At the end of his search, he is alone in the Canadian Rockies, spending the night in a little tent. In the cool morning he walks to a stream, his thoughts occupied by a sense of emptiness and powerlessness. He feels incapable of giving, of kindness, and of loving. Yet as he submerges himself in the cold water, he feels not shock but comfort. As one might in baptismal waters, he feels held by hands that heal, care, and mold. He hears the words that tell him he is whole. In this closing scene we are provided a window into the soul of Generation X and its religious quest.

Who Is Generation X?

Coupland is a writer who has been given credit for providing a name to the post-Boomer generation. It was not his intent, but the title of his
first novel, *Generation X*, gave this generation a name that has been picked up by the culture. Other names have met with mixed success. This generation has been called “Busters” with reference to the fact that in 1965 the birth rate dipped below four million after eighteen years of the post-World War Two “baby boom.” Strauss and Howe, authors of *Generations*³ and *13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?*,³ have selected the birth years of 1961 to 1981. When they did their work, they could not find a word that they thought captured the essence of this generation. They selected the name *I3ers*, since this was the thirteenth generation in the history of the United States. Many persons in this generation do not like these or other labels. Nonetheless, they usually find themselves using the “Generation X” handle as they describe themselves.

The Xers are not a small or insignificant cohort. If you choose the briefest range of years ascribed to this generation, their numbers would still rank them as the twenty-fourth largest nation. Should you agree with Strauss and Howe’s range of years, they would be the eleventh largest nation. If nothing else, these comparisons should shatter the stereotype of a small, insignificant generation. In fact, if you use the Strauss and Howe birth years, they are a larger generation than the Boomers.

I believe Strauss and Howe make the best case for their birth years range. A generation is usually shaped by events that happen when its members are between 15 and 25 years old. This is the age span when young people of any generation begin to define themselves, and they always do so in a particular historical and cultural context. Certain realities will shape their outlook and typical way of understanding and interpreting what is happening to them. To be sure, all generations go through certain developmental stages that set the agenda to be confronted and resolved. However, how each generation sees this and responds to it will vary.

For the purpose of this discussion, the Strauss and Howe birth years will be the basis for dating Generation X. Its members “came of age” shaped by such events as Three Mile Island, the Iran hostage crisis, and the Challenger explosion.

Another key factor for understanding the religious quest and the theological task confronting Generation X is the reality of a thoroughly post-Christendom, secularized society. Europe has experienced this reality for a long time. For the past two hundred years, European theologians and philosophers have dealt in their
writings with the death of Christendom. The United States has not felt this reality to the same extent, although the reality of secularism has been a topic in academic theological circles for decades.

In some ways, this secularism is at the heart of the so-called "liberal" versus "conservative" theological debate. "Liberals" (characters as "modernist") have sought to find ways to make Christian faith relevant in the contexts of this new worldview with optimism and confidence in what humankind can do. "Conservatives" (characterized as "fundamentalist") have sought to resist these new forces and to preserve or restore the world of Christendom. Both have had to deal with the reality of a culture that is shaped by a view of "life after God."

For Generation X, these differences seem to have little point and less relevance to their situation. Christendom—a society shaped thoroughly by Christianity—is not even a memory. Modernism, whether experienced as the liberal confidence in science to usher in a new age of human achievement or the Boomers’ claim to be able to remake the world according to their ideals, is a fraud. It cannot deliver what it promises. On the other hand, the conservative notion of there being one absolute God has little impact on Generation X. The only absolute Xers believe exists is that there are not absolutes. Not living in the religious ghetto of Christendom, they encounter countless absolute claims that seem to do more harm than good, as those advocating various positions try to persuade or coerce others into accepting their view of what is absolute.

Generational Religious Issues Provoked by Generation X

Generational differences are not hypothetical. They make up the warp and woof of daily life. Whether in families, the workplace, education settings, politics, communities, the media, or religious life, the different generations understand the meaning and purpose of life from the finite perspective of their own lives. These differences are hard to hide because they touch where we live and what we care deeply about. They help explain who we are. They help us understand and give meaning to what we encounter in life.

Many persons of other generations experience Generation X as a challenge. They desire to help, guide, and shape the Xers. However,
Xers have also challenged some of the assumptions of other generations that have served as a basis for their religious understandings.

This is a critical issue. More is at stake than the usual generational differences found when generations seek to pass on the wisdom of their experience and the traditions that have given their lives meaning and purpose. When things seemed to remain similar from one generation to the next, the experience of one generation could then be carried over to the next generation. Today, because of accelerating change, generations are having to forge understandings in which each generation has fewer and fewer experiences in common. When generations lived in more homogenous and isolated communities, people found it easier to accept the norms of one's community as absolute. In a wired Internet world of instantaneous interactive communication, however, one can escape neither the reality of other views nor the necessity of having to live in heterogeneous communities. Not just technology has changed, but the assumptions upon which we build our worldview.

The mature GI Generation (born 1901 to 1924, according to Strauss and Howe) made it through a Depression and the Second World War. Therefore, they often assume that every generation is able to go on to a better and richer life. Having spent a lifetime working in large organizations that have maintained the peace in the world for the past fifty years and having seen the advance of prosperity that exceeded their wildest hopes, this generation believes that if you pay your dues you will reap the reward in the future. Sacrifice, deferred gratification, and loyalty to institutions are the ways to a better future.

Generation X challenges these assumptions about the human situation. Xers believe that the older GI generation has forgotten the power of the realities that they had to deal with earlier in life. Xers do not experience the world as friendly. They do not assume institutions can promise or deliver security. They believe that fewer of their generation will have a prosperous life than in the generations that preceded them. They believe that there is no security in any of the arrangements of life that the GIs hold so important: marriage, the family, the community, and the workplace. GI assumptions include the security of a religious worldview in which we are called to fulfill our duty to God and in which God will reward us. Xers challenge GIs by saying they see little correlation between believing in God and having life go well. Whether it is the power of evil, a capriciousness of life, or the
indifference of God does not change the reality. Life is not secure in terms of either income or meaning.

The other mature generation, the Silent Generation (born 1925 to 1943, according to Strauss and Howe), is the most homogenous of the living generations in the United States. Economic depression and a world war had the consequence of reducing immigration.

This generation has been a master of compromise. It tries to find a way to minimize differences. Even those Silents who had a view of racial equality did not have to deal with the reality of an integrated world because they lived in a segregated society. This generation lived in a world that for all practical purposes has now ceased to exist. Issues of race, gender, and the place of the United States in the world have all shifted.

The Silents who have experienced the challenge of their Boomer children find little comfort in an Xer generation that is the most diverse in our country’s history. They do not understand the sexual, ethnic, and religious diversity of the Xer generation, which seeks to find a way to include these differences in their religious worldview. Exclusive religious claims—that you can be saved only if you believe in Jesus, that God will reject and judge you even if you are a devout follower of another faith or seek only to be a friend to others without a religious faith—are not acceptable to Xers. Xers also challenge Silents by claiming that it is not enough to talk about accepting differences; one must affirm these differences and see them as gifts that help us to detect and eliminate our blindness to the enriching benefits of diversity as a gift of God.

Boomers pose a unique challenge to the Xers. Boomers were a welcomed generation in which children were not only born in record numbers but were affirmed, supported, encouraged, and praised for their potential. Xers have never known as much family stability as have Boomers. More Boomers had the promise and expectation of a good life as a right they would inherit. Boomers had the confidence that they could right many wrongs, change institutions, find personal fulfillment, have meaningful relationships, and transform the way the world lives for the good of all.

Xers see this as hubris. Having experienced more fractured, less secure human relationships, Xers have difficulty trusting others and believing others can be trusted. They have been caught up in the realities of survival. They have not seen any great benefits from
Boomer idealism. They think that the belief that one can change the world is an illusion.

Boomers feel unappreciated, that their accomplishments are not recognized by Xers. They are more likely to question Xers than they are to reassess their own ideals because of the impact their ideals have had on Xers. For example, gender issues lack the passion for Xers that they had held for Boomers because Xers are not sure that gender issues have made life any easier or better, especially for women, families, and children.

Xers see the Boomers' stress on significant relationships and personal fulfillment as not always being compatible. At heart, this is a religious issue about community. In church circles, an Xer might question whether just having a large group of individuals gathered at the same place and time is true community. Xers would see true community more in a small gathering of friends who are bound together not because they hold common ideals but because they care for one another. An Xer-Boomer conflict will play itself out over the next fifteen to twenty years as Xers challenge the Boomers to stop talking about ideals and help find practical ways to do something constructive about the "everyday" issues of life.

Technology will force the Xers into the role of being an interim generation. They are not just a generation reared on television like the Boomers, but they are the first Internet generation. Yet Xers are transitional because the generation behind them, whose members began to be born in 1982, will be the first total Internet generation.

This next generation has been described as the "net generation" or "lap generation." They will uniquely challenge the Xers. Many of them are the children of Xers, and what the Xers face along with the Boomers is the reality that in this new world of the Internet, their children become their teachers in many ways. The new net generation is evoking many hopes and promises for a better world. Xers see this when they remember that as they were growing up, children were portrayed as demonic in movies such as *Children of the Damned*, *Rosemary's Baby*, and *The Exorcist*. The net generation is being depicted in movies such as *Big* and *Home Alone* as the messianic heroes who rescue the world from dangers that adults either create or cannot overcome.

Xers will be more likely to defer to this generation. Their capacity to step aside so those that follow can lead is a way to give their lives for others. This response will stand as a religious challenge to a
younger generation, for they will have little difficulty believing that this deferral was deserved and earned. If the net generation can come to see that this capacity to step aside is a gift of a deep human and religious impulse, they will discover a rich legacy that Xers are bequeathing them.

Xer Spirituality

Xer spirituality is intertwined with the way Xers experience life and the world. The theological issues that will engage this generation are not to be found in a quest for objective truth so much as in a quest for subjective relevance. Given their assumption that there are no absolutes, attempts to commend the faith by logical linear exposition of the tenets of faith will have little credibility with Xers. As children of post-Christendom, they see these expositions as interesting at best and irrelevant at worst. These expositions address the questions that have occupied the attention of those disputing fine points that seem to matter only to insiders.

Xers' questions are more personal and more basic. If the claims of faith are true, they must be truths that believers are willing to live from and for. Subjectivity is not seen as commending a private faith as much as it is a criterion that commends its relevance because people are living it. In this sense, apologetics that commends the faith is not a refuting of the positions of others nor even a showing of how faith answers the questions of Xers. Instead, the apologetics that matter are the convergence of word and deed.

Generation X has been described as “alone” because so many Xers have to rely on themselves for so much. Their life experience is one of precarious relationships that lack staying power or are fragile at best. This generation has seen parents divorce and remarry. They have lived with absent parents whose absence might be from abandonment or from involvement at work. The fact that many of these relationships have been fractured has created a fear that no relationship can be trusted to endure. The pain of separation often prevents Xers from entering into relationships that require commitment.

If one can say that our experiences provide a precondition for our experience of God, this life experience presents some unique challenges as to how faith expresses what it believes about God. A critical question arises when one seeks to explain to Xers the more
traditional views of the atonement. Xers can identify with a son who was sent by the father to do the father’s work. They can appreciate the hurt, pain, and fear of a son who is abandoned at the critical moment of doing the father’s will and work. They can feel Jesus’ angst, but this does not necessarily lead them to make a commitment to the God who has treated his son as many of their parents have treated them. They can have a relationship with Jesus because they have empathy for him. This does not automatically translate into devotion to God.

Xers want to know in terms that Jürgen Moltmann has understood when he asks what difference does Jesus’ obedience mean for God. They are not interested in a God who is remote, unmoved, untouched by what happens to us. They have had enough of that in their personal lives. They want a relationship with God but find it difficult to develop one if they feel God does not care about or is unaffected by their plight. In this regard, those who have sought to use the insights of process theology and liberation theology offer some options for speaking about God. A God who experiences pain, suffers the agony of the son’s experience of separation, and bears in God’s being the cumulative impact of human suffering is easier to commend to Xers than an all-powerful, untouched, unmoved, and unchanging God. In some ways, many may be seeking the parent figure they never have known in their lives.

Because this generation has seen so many promises broken; encountered so many risks, such as unstable family life, job insecurity, and new health menaces such as AIDS; and been given few promises of a future that can offer the certainty of any security, they are cynical survivors. They ask, who keeps their promises? Whose word can be trusted? They see little difference between marketers who try to find ways to get them to buy products and services and evangelists who seek to find ways to get them into a church. These promises do not deliver. Life is not better or different. Nothing seems real, authentic. They hunger for the reality of faith, but the absence of encountering this reality in their lives causes them to turn off all the messages that assault them. They are not sure anyone is interested in or cares about them. They sense that they are surrounded by messages that judge rather than affirm them. They seldom encounter a message of grace such as that expressed by Paul Tillich, which says simply that you are accepted and you can act on that message.

The Xer’s life experience drives us back to the basic message of grace. If there is grace for me from God, can I encounter grace from another follower of Jesus who accepts me as I am? Someone who
comes to me not to teach but to learn, not to give but to receive, not to change me but to be changed by me?

Jonathan Larson’s musical Rent is to the Xers what Hair was to the Boomers. Larson wrote this musical to bring the questions of his generation that struggles with its pain and separation. Larson died a premature death of an aortic aneurysm after returning to his apartment on the night of the successful dress rehearsal. In one of the songs from this musical, a chorus asks this question of lament: “Will I lose my dignity? Will someone care? Will I wake tomorrow from this nightmare?” Within the musical, this burning question emerges in an AIDS support group; it also expresses a deep sense of hopelessness and a deep longing for a word of accepting grace.

The diversity of God’s creation is both celebrated and flaunted by Xers. This generation is diverse. It is a multicultural and multiracial generation. This diversity extends from the MTV worldwide network that has provided a common voice for this generation, defying national boundaries. It continues through the Internet, as this generation discovers that the boundaries of time and space no longer dictate our view of the world and those who live in it. This generation struggles with a need to accept others even if they do not share their skin color, language, culture, sexual orientation, and spiritual beliefs. Xers therefore pose a challenge to the Christian faith’s exclusivist christology. In some ways, they call the church to pay more attention to the first and third persons of the Trinity. In the Xers’ view, christology must serve the total work of God that honors the diversity of creation as a gift of God. The exclusivity of the church as it requires that all come into a christological relationship with God seems to create a division between the work of the first and second persons of the Trinity and may even ignore the surprising creativity of the third person. Xers will challenge those who commend the faith to be more open to the possibilities inherent in a less truncated view of the Trinitarian experience of God.

One of the challenges that Generation X presents is particularly relevant to those in Protestant circles. The convergence of the rise of Protestantism and its reliance on the written and spoken word, with the technological development of the printing press, has led the Protestant paradigm to encounter and experience faith in more linear, cognitive ways. Xers’ technology is not the written word. The Xers are a multisensory generation. This fact has more to do with the way reality is experienced than with the way visual and musical formats
have enhanced communication. The Xer generation assimilates information in multiple formats and often does so simultaneously. With their eyes, ears, and bodies, they are engaged as whole persons by the realities of life. In some respects, the intuitive role of the left brain is regaining a credibility to match the logical work of the right brain that has dominated Protestantism. Xers do not believe that if you cannot explain something it must not be true. They are more likely to believe that if you can explain something, its truth is much less likely ultimately to matter.

What has emerged with Xers is the realization that it is not just the way we communicate that has changed but also what we communicate. They accept the fact that confidence in science to provide objective, verifiable truth is no longer seen as possible. Such an approach can no longer be the *sine qua non* of communicating the faith. This may explain why some Xers have been drawn back to the Orthodox, Episcopal, and Roman Catholic traditions, which rely more on the liturgy than on the word to share the mystery of faith. Theology and worship can no longer be seen as separate entities. Xers challenge us to be open to the possibility that the subjective mystery of worship may be the most profound way to do theology.

At the heart of the life questions Generation X asks is the issue of hope. Hope is a question that arises when lack of confidence in the future and uncertainty of life and tomorrow are prevalent. In many ways, the issues that this generation must confront intensify a recurring theme that has been amplifying its sound through this century: *Does life have meaning? And if so, what is that meaning?*

The musical *Rent* highlights this theme. This Pulitzer Prize-winning drama captures the source of hope for Generation X. Hope is not to be found in all those places in which the culture has sought to make us feel secure. It is found in the ability to risk being open to relationships with others in their pain and hurt as well as in their hopes and dreams.

In the musical, each time that “Christmas Bells Are Ringing” is reprised, the number of homeless people who sing expands by one, until there are seven singing the final time the reprise appears. They express a lament in these words: “How time flies when compassion dies. No stockings, no candy canes, no gingerbread, no safety net, no loose change, no change no . . . Santa Claus ain’t coming, no room at the Holiday Inn—again.”

The term *rent* in the musical uses two meanings of the word. One way points to being torn apart personally and in our relationships. The
other way expands its meaning from renting property to how in our lives we seldom own our own person, emotions, or positions. We just rent.

This rather discouraging and depressing analysis captures the willingness of Generation X to look into the abyss of the meaninglessness of what has been offered to it. If there is to be hope, it will not come in grand designs to reform and remake the world. The world has suffered too much from those who have sought to impose meaning on life and their views of meaning on others. Hope will be found not in grand designs but in very human communities where people are trying to and do relate to one another.

At this point, Jesus appears with new relevance and authenticity. Here was a true friend. He was not limited to defining his community by theology, biology, geography, or sociology. He risks breaking out of the conventional patterns and understandings of what it means to live an authentic life. His friends come from various arenas of life. He wants others to follow him not for his aggrandizement but for their empowerment to discover that they have worth and can accept and value others.

This true friend never abandons his friends. He gives himself for those who love him and those who hate him. He will exclude no one from his passion and compassion. Finally, he makes the supreme sacrifice. He dies for his friends. He gives his life for others by dying a painful death, not to gain anything for himself but to remain true to his nature, one of loving others and serving others.

This strange, unpretentious, free person challenges all claims to give life security and meaning. In doing so, he becomes the way to meaning, not in spite of his death but because of his death. He commends his message and his way by the authentic reality of his person. Who he is and what he does resonate with others. That is what commends Jesus to Xers. His authentic humanity portrays a humane God of caring compassion who stands with us and is there for us. There can be hope. Hope has the last word, That is what enables us to face the uncertainty of today. Love is never lost.

The centerpiece of Rent is the song, “Seasons of Love.” Unlike la Bohème, in which Mimi dies in the final scene, in Rent Mini comes back from death’s door to life because of the love of others. This pivotal song comes at the beginning of the second act, capturing and developing a message of hope for Xers as it focuses on the question, “How do you measure a year?”
You can measure it in minutes, 525,600 of them. You can measure it in activities, emotions, tasks, and the normal events of life that take place. The answer the song offers is “remember the love,” “measure your life in love,” “seasons of love.”

Some may say that this overused word is unable to convey any significant meaning. However, as the Xer characters in the musical engage one another, theirs is not a sentimental view of love that overlooks the stress and strains of relationships. It is an “in-spite-of love,” in which people with differences find community, relationships, meaning, and, finally, hope. This hope is a realized eschatology. Xers are not asking about life after death or what will happen at the end of history. They want to know whether we can experience life before death, and they point to the possibilities that communities of hope and love can exist. The promise is true not only for the end times but also for this time. The presentation of an eschatological hope is for now and not just then. Without it, there is nothing that is real or authentic. This is not a sentimental affirmation of love. It is a “tough love” that has no illusion over who we are, that knows the stresses and strains of our relationships, and that still affirms that we can love another. There is a convergence of the theme of Rent and the gospel. The aspiration of “Seasons of Love” resonates with the gospel.

A Modest Reason to Hope

Xer Christians have the possibility of becoming a “gospel minority.” They are young in age, and many are new in faith. However, they approach faith not just with the usual questions of those who are young and new in the faith. There has been a radical shift in the world. In terms of Old Testament images, Xers are not like the Israelites wandering toward a promised land in the future. Nor are they engaged in the triumphal times of Israel’s golden age of David and Solomon. Xers are the Israelites in exile in Babylon, seeking to find how to sing the Lord’s song in a strange land. They cannot go back in space or time. Their stance is not one of disrespect. They just know in the depths of their being that the task they face is not one of restoration but of new creation. They assume they must learn how to think about faith, to live faith, and to communicate faith in a setting that very few in the history of the church have had to figure out. Theirs is not only a new task but an awesome responsibility. The reality that faith is only
one generation away from extinction is their special burden because
they must leave the old and familiar and seek to discover the new and
relevant way to serve God, at the same time finding a way faithfully to
express the gospel.

Intuitively, they sense this. They hope those who are older will
appreciate the enormity of the task they have before them. They do not
claim to have all the answers. There will be many false starts.
However, as this generation seeks to live and explain what it means to
live as a Christian in a post-Christendom time, they will find their
voice and give expression to what this means. They will give hope a
voice.

Postscript

It was the end of five days of hard work reflecting on ministry with,
to, and for Xers by Xer pastors. They expressed their appreciation for
having time with one another to address what they felt was the urgent
issue of how to share the promise of the faith with their peers. They
said this time together was an important and unique experience for
them. "We feel so alone in ministry. So few seem to understand us and
what we are concerned about. Here we have experienced a community
with a common purpose to reach our generation."

The passion is there, the commitment exists, and the work is
waiting. In the end, the future of the church in the twenty-first century
is in the hands of the Xers. They are the first generation that will begin
the long journey to give the church its words, its actions, and its
message so that faith will become a reality to those who will live in
the twenty-first century. They will not finish the task, but they are the
ones to whom the opportunity and responsibility have fallen.

I believe this call is in good hands. We are about to discover more
of the unfathomable riches of the gospel. I write as one who will not
make this journey but as one who stands ready to learn from this
exciting generation so that my understanding of the gospel will be
enhanced and the possibility of my living more fully that faith will be
expanded. I believe that this generation, as it searches for hope, will
not only find it for themselves but will bequeath it to those who have
preceded them and to those who will follow them.12
Notes

11. See the writings of Juan Luis Segundo, a Roman Catholic liberation theologian. "We must stop fearing that the gospel no longer has the power to attract human beings." *The Hidden Motives of Pastoral Action* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 120.
12. Additional suggested readings:

George Barna, *Generation Next* (Glendale, CA: Barna Research Group, 1995);
More than one theologian has asked, "How do we live with God after Auschwitz; and how without?" At the heart of any theological wrestling with the Shoah is the multilayered and multivoiced question of God. For many, it is asked by Elie Wiesel in Night: "Where is God now?" For some the question is posed directly to God in lament and/or protest asking, "Where were you?" For some, it is raised in anger and rage and posed to those who have not dealt with the theological implications of Auschwitz, demanding of those who still speak faithfully of God, "Come to terms with what happened. How dare you speak of God in the same way now, after what happened there!" However the question is raised, it haunts faithful Jews and Christians, especially those who wrestle with their faith in the shadowing light of Auschwitz.

No one has argued more persuasively than Irving Greenberg that the Holocaust is an orienting event of revelatory significance. His 1974
essay, “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity after the Holocaust,” was a landmark exploration of this theme. Thereafter, his criterion of the burning children of Auschwitz has haunted theologians, like me, who seek to find reorientation and balance in the fiery shadows of the Shoah. The “way to wholeness,” he wrote, passes “through the demonic, consuming flames of a crematorium . . . . Neither Exodus nor Easter wins out or is totally blotted out by Buchenwald, but we encounter both polar experiences; the life of faith is lived between them. And this dialectic opens new models of response to God.”

Perhaps there is no better scriptural passage to focus this dialectic than that of Exodus 3:1-15, recording as it does both the call of Moses to lead his people to deliverance and the self-disclosure of the God of Israel in the burning bush of Horeb/Sinai. For Jews, God is the Holy Other, the great I Am, who hears the cries of Israel and delivers them as a covenant partner eternally committed to their welfare. After Auschwitz, how do any of us approach this burning bush and identify its holy ground?

Approaching the Burning Bush

The episode of Moses at the burning bush is familiar. Moses, while tending his father-in-law’s sheep, comes to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. There Moses encounters a burning bush, which he turns aside to see because it is not consumed in the burning. As he does, he hears a voice calling his name from the midst of the burning bush. Moses responds forthrightly, “Here I am (hineni),” presenting himself in readiness to be further addressed by the as yet unidentified voice.

In just fifteen verses the text mediates the story of Moses’ call to deliver his people; it narrates the giving of the divine name to Moses; it reveals God’s attentiveness to the Israelite people and their plight in Egypt; it establishes the significance of Sinai in the history of Israel; and it identifies the Eternal God of the Universe as one with the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob (as the God of Israel’s ancestors), and a God who desires freedom for a people chosen for relationship (i.e., covenantal partnership). The story of the burning bush is rich and inexhaustible, revealing how the Israelite
people come to know themselves embraced by a covenanting God of deliverance and life.

Attending to the Burning Bush

What calls and speaks with such force that Moses, or anyone else, would turn aside to see what is taking place? The story describes a bush (s'neh) that is on fire but not consumed. Magical images in the tradition of Cecil B. DeMille conjure up a bush made of fire or a bush that burns yet is untouched by the flames that engulf it. Of course, the text tells us neither; we supply such images in the absence of a textual explanation. The text relates only that the bush was not consumed.

The traditional compilation of midrashim on this episode inquires about the significance of the bush that Moses turned aside to see. What kind of bush was it? According to the text, it (s'neh) was a common thorn bush. But why should a common bush be chosen as an instrument of divine disclosure? Here midrashic interpretation draws the following connections between the bush and Israel:

*Just as the thorn bush is the lowliest of all trees in the world, so Israel was lowly and humble in Egypt;*

*Just as the thorn bush is the prickliest of all trees and any bird that goes into it does not come out unscathed, so was the servitude of Egypt more grievous before God than all other servitudes in the world.*

*Just as one makes of thorns a fence for a garden, so Israel is a fence to the world.*

The connections are built on the ordinariness of Israel. God speaks through an ordinary people, a prickly people with very specific claims about their relationship to God and their role in history as a priestly people. Elizabeth Barrett Browning conveys this kind of association in her allusion to the burning bush in her poem *Aurora Leigh:*

*Earth's crammed with heaven,*
*And every common bush afire with God;*
And, only he who sees takes off his shoes—
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.⁶

But there is more at work here than Browning portrays. The common thorn bush is also identified with Israel's prickliness (like a hedge around a garden or vineyard). Israel's specific, historic identity as a priestly people elected for that purpose is an essential part of the revelatory disclosure; and that identity can be prickly. Even so, it is not the bush per se, or its boundary marking or witness qualities that draw Moses' attention to this episode;⁷ rather the bush/Israel is burning (oppressed and threatened), and Moses turns to look because the bush/Israel is not consumed. Indeed, Exodus Rabbah makes a similar point even though the midrashist sees the bush more literally than I shall be suggesting:

Why did God show Moses such a symbol? Because he [Moses] had thought to himself that the Egyptians might consume Israel; hence did God show him a fire which burnt but did not consume, saying to him: "Just as the thorn bush is burning and is not consumed, so the Egyptians will not be able to destroy Israel."⁸

Could the revelatory power in the episode be that the bush did burn and, nevertheless, survived? Such a recognition would lead to considering a different, and much less magical, possibility than the one offered by film-maker C. B. DeMille and his ilk: a living entity that is being burned but which upon inspection we discover is not being wholly consumed. In this case, the intensity of the story would be directly related to recognizing how the power of the living, growing entity is not overwhelmed by the image or force of its own destruction. Only in surviving the fire could the bush not be consumed. That is, we can look at a bush that has burned and not been consumed only if the bush still lives. Consequently, the image would be one of endurance and resistance (if the fire is still raging) or of an aftermath (if the fire has gone out) that includes survival. Either way, the image is powerful without having to be magical.

This phenomenon should not be unfamiliar. Consider Martin Luther King, Jr., and the burning images of a bombed-out church or synagogue; or the flaming torches of the Ku Klux Klan and its burning cross; or Mohandas Gandhi and the searing shame of untouchability.
unmasked for the oppression it truly is. Or consider Nelson Mandela and
the burning hatred of apartheid. From the strength of a people surviving
oppression (or who in the midst of oppression are nonetheless struggling
to live with hope and pride and who can then rise from the flames of that
destruction into something more) we might talk about a fire that does not
consume the people it threatens to consume.

In other words the disclosure is focused not simply in the fire or in
the bush alone, but in the gestalt of a bush, burning and surviving to
bear witness to something more. This point is crucial; the revelatory
power is in life and its witness to itself, even in the face of destruction.
After Auschwitz, this point grows in significance.

The hope and future of covenant life beckons forth, in this case
especially in its violation. Yet Moses must turn aside to see, before he
is in position to hear any call coming from its midst. He attends, alert,
fully present, covenantally ready. The Hebrew term is hinëni: “Here I
am.” The orienting begins in attentiveness . . . and the offering of his
presence, also implied by the term hinëni.

As the scene progresses, the drama intensifies. God commands,
“Come no closer! Remove your sandals, for the place where you are
standing is holy ground.” Then God declares God’s own identity, in
effect responding with a divine hinëni. Presence invites presence and
responds to presence. Moses’ presence to the reality of the burning
bush evokes a corresponding divine Presence with the accompanying
recognition that the “place” of this encounter is holy ground.
Moreover, Moses has attended with God to God’s people, who are also
Moses’ people. This, too, is part of the gestalt of the burning bush.
Solidarity and mutual presence together constitute covenantal
presence; and that is holy.

Consider what is at work here. The encounter and its covenantal
dynamics are holy. The place of covenantal meeting is holy.
Furthermore, we need not specify which aspect of the event is the
source of holiness. It is the overall gestalt that comes together to
reveal what is of ultimate significance for Moses and the Holy One
who embraces him. It is the configuring and reconfiguring gestalt that
reveals what is holy for those who follow Moses. And this is the
ground of divine-human encounter that is sacred.

The story continues to deepen. God explains that the suffering of
Israel has been the focus of divine compassion and concern.
Furthermore, the divine intention is to deliver them from their
oppression, leading them from the constricted land of oppression
(Mitzrayim/Egypt, literally means “narrow land”) to a broad land overflowing with plenty—an abundant land. Yet God cannot act alone, or so it is implied. God needs Moses’ help, and the sacred summons emerges as the divine intention unfolds. The presence of mutual attention leads to the revelation of Israel’s oppression and Moses’ divinely appointed task. Throughout, the scene is interactive and mutually disclosing. As Moses reveals more of himself, likewise God reveals more of God’s self to Moses, but never without retaining the ultimate mystery and divine freedom that are God’s. The scene and its mutual disclosure press on toward increased responsibility for Moses and unfolding clarification of the covenant pact between God and Israel.

The Summoning Call

Who and what calls Moses? The story is ambiguous, saying first that an angel of the LORD called from the bush. Thereafter, the text tells of God speaking to Moses. Why? What does the text preserve, or gain, in retaining an ambiguous designation of the one speaking of Moses? Are we, the listeners/hearers of this language, invited into the ambiguous designation of the one speaking to Moses? Are we, the listeners/hearers of this language, invited into the ambiguity that surrounds any true encounter with that which is holy and sacred? Does the text preserve the mystery of the encounter and the burden of interpretation of that mystery with a designation that signals a threshold of identification? Does the text, with its ambiguity, tell us something about the dynamics of vocation as well? From whence does a sense of calling come? With what does the call speak? How does it speak? In this case, the story speaks; however, the story and the text are not equivalent, for the story transcends the text, even though it is mediated by it. Just as Moses turns aside to attend to the burning bush and hears God speak from its midst/configuring gestalt, faithful readers of this text/hearers of this story are invited to assert that in all of that, the narrative’s configuring gestalt, God speaks.

The story, in its simplicity, does not specify how or why the bush is burning or what the bush might represent or what or who set the bush on fire. Because it does not offer such specificity, it leaves room to examine important distinctions that we are compelled to make in the aftermath of orienting experiences. If the bush is the people Israel, would it not be appropriate to say that Pharaoh has set it afame?
Perhaps. But what is gained by refraining from this kind of specificity? The bush calls Moses to attend to it after the fire is underway. Is that not a more accurate reflection of how oppression is recognized—after it is well underway and taking victims? Was that not the case for Moses regarding his people? He had seen their suffering firsthand. He had even acted in passion regarding what he had witnessed earlier in his life. But the suffering and oppression did not go away. Instead Moses did; he fled. Can we read Moses' response to the burning bush to mean that he could not let his people's suffering remain unattended to no matter how much he might wish, despite his prior history and despite where his attention would soon take him?

We may also ask to what Moses is drawn. Is he drawn to the flames? The bush? Or the survival of a bush that is burning? The bush is not consumed in the burning; according to the text, that is what draws his attention. The attention Moses gives is a confirming gaze directed to a still or yet living bush, threatened by fire, but reaching out to him with its witness to life. Moses is drawn to the bush's survival, not its burning. Therefore, we must specify that the witness of that truth is not the work of who or what set the fire. Instead it is the power of life to live through and transcend its own destruction that we must respect. Again, the orienting character of such an event resides not simply in its parts but in its overall gestalt, aspects of which may still remain unknown or unarticulated. If we turn aside to face the searing reality of the Shoah, we can say Hitler and his henchmen set the bush we identify with Israel on fire, but not simply Hitler. The fuel of anti-Semitism was an essential part of its kindling, as well as the atmosphere that fanned its flames. The overall gestalt must be confronted here, too. And we are called by the story and by history to turn aside with Moses to face the burning bush again. We are drawn by the witness to life, in its extreme violation and in the resistance to annihilation, not simply to the pain and suffering embodied in the flames. The Shoah, however, is not the bush, though it may be the flames that engulfed the bush. The overall gestalt of the burning bush that is not consumed causes us to turn aside and see.

**Facing the Bush (and Its Ashes)**

In the scarlet shadows of Auschwitz, the burning bush takes on terrifying dimensions and intensity. If the bush is truly Israel in
burning need, then the post-Shoah image of that bush assumes the visage of 1.5 million children, the human tender of a victimized people. Their agony-filled cries now silenced by hatred and indifference reach out to those with courage to hear a summoning call to responsibility and witness. The mystical and revelatory dynamic of I AM-you are now includes the cries of burning children in the crackling sounds of leaping flames. Ke-Tzetnik 135633 (Yehiel De Nur) writes, “Auschwitz is a flaming pyre. I know. I have been summoned to witness the fire belching sight.”

The I AM-you are summoning dynamic takes on a profoundly unsettling summons for those who survived their encounter. The summons to witness as survivor calls for the survivor to re-enter a nightmare that will not die—by choice. And the burning children of Auschwitz, forever embraced in the burning bush, summon forth our covenantal readiness. How shall we respond? In the post-Shoah shadows of the late twentieth century, the burning bush can be a terrifying figure. To return to the imagery of the narrative, we must remove our shoes and face this burning bush with great care, for here we stand with vulnerable others on holy as well as terrifying ground. Still, we must attend to its summoning visage, however unsettling it might be. And we must hear the urgency of its summons to act, knowing now the cost of not doing either before it was nearly too late.

The story as preserved in the text (Exod. 3:1-15) is silent about any branches that have been lost in the burning. Instead, the focus is on the bush that is not consumed. Nevertheless, there were branches lost in the burning; after Auschwitz, we cannot ignore this. Consequently, we must ask about branches that were lost under Pharaoh as well as those lost under Hitler. Indeed, as we ask about Israelites who perished under their oppression in Egypt, we find ourselves giving Moses a lamenting voice in much the same spirit that subsequent readings and interpretations of Torah saw themselves giving the teachings of Moses long after Moses had passed on. In this fashion, we remain true not only to Moses as the mediator/giver of Torah but also to the six million—especially the burning children of Auschwitz. So we ask about branches the text overlooks believing that the larger Story that the text mediates must do so as well. This insistence is an essential part of our post-Shoah hineni.

So, then, where does our post-Shoah return to the burning bush place us? With Moses, turning aside to see what is yet burning but not (yet?) consumed. And in turning aside to attend to this event, we
discover ourselves summoned into covenantal presence. In other words, even now, the response is hineni, a confessional presence that brings full acknowledgement and responsibility to the narrative as well as to history as they meet in the event we identify as the Shoah. Equally unsettling is the recognition that if the burning bush is aflame with a life-destroying fire that does not consume itself, then it still burns. Consequently, any responsible hineni requires our asking "where?" In the shadows of the Shoah, this question is hauntingly acute. Where are God’s people oppressed and suffering? Furthermore, who are they? In the age of Shoah, Israel’s representative witness cannot be forgotten even as we deal with Israel’s particularity. Together they are a critical warning as well. What can happen once, can happen again. Hence, the pledge “never again” must attend to other situations and to other people at the same time it speaks for Israel and her people near and far.

This imperative is not foreign to the biblical witness. Indeed, it permeates the heart of Torah. Over and over again, Israel is reminded to treat the strangers in their midst honorably, for once they were strangers in a foreign land. Greenberg makes the post-Shoah context of this ethical claim urgently clear:

We also face the challenge to create the conditions under which human beings will grow as an image of God. . . . It was the ability to distinguish some people as human and others as not that enable the Nazis to segregate and then destroy the "subhumans" (Jews, Gypsies, Slavs). . . . The indivisibility of human dignity and equality becomes an essential bulwark against repetition of another Holocaust. It is the command rising out of Auschwitz.

After Auschwitz, Israel, as the people of God, represents the claim of every person to be viewed as created in the image of God. In that reflected light, we are summoned by the burning bush in Israel’s story to attend to the burning bushes of others. To be sure, it is no easy task to incorporate this admonition. Yet this is the tension of living within the beckoning reach of the burning bush.

Of course, anti-Semitism still burns in human hearts across the world; so it cannot be dismissed or left behind as attention is directed toward others set apart for victimization. Rather, the task grows more complex. And with the political realities and difficulties of modern
Israel, the dilemma grows even more convoluted and acute. Nonetheless, Israel and the Jewish people remain set apart, summoned to a representative role (however more difficult it has become) as “priests” for a covenantal way intended for all peoples to follow.

**Coming to Terms with God**

Our *hinenu* includes a deep insistence that the Shoah has radically affected how we can think and talk about God. We even insist on criteria like Irving Greenberg’s haunting imagery of “the burning children.” We ask about the innocent victims, the one-and-a-half million children who perished in the flames. Any talk of survival must be tempered by coming to terms with their loss. So how does the story about a burning bush help us face such deep and searing questions? To draw help from the narrative we must first ask how Moses comes to terms with his experience. What happens to Moses? What does Moses learn about God? How is divinity present for him?

Moses discovers an embracing, covenanting God who remains always other even though steadfastly committed to a continuing relationship with the people of Israel. Likewise, this covenanting One is a summoning Other, who in some fashion calls Moses to act on behalf of his people. More specifically, Moses discovers God to be present in the summoning gestalt of relation and responsibility configured in and through the burning bush. Still, God remains the One who is whatsoever and whomsoever God chooses.

After the Shoah, talk of God is difficult. Particularly trying are the classical ways of thinking of God’s relationship to history and the interventionist assumptions that characterize how the biblical and philosophical traditions face these issues. Throughout, God talk is punctuated with images and metaphors of monarchic (imperial) notions of power that express interventionist assumptions. Even the covenantal imagery participates in these assumptions about divine power. With the Shoah, such assumptions about power, divinity, and covenant come under fire, literally and figuratively. How, then, does one conceive of God given the radical way in which the covenantal fabric of life (among peoples and between God and God’s covenant people) has been torn?

Arthur Cohen, Richard Rubenstein, and Irving Greenberg have addressed both the fundamental assumptions about God’s relationship
to history within a covenantal framework and the ways in which those assumptions about history and God's relationship to it are shattered by the Shoah. For Cohen, the interruptive character of a divine pledge to act in history on behalf of a covenantal people is sharply challenged. God did not intervene. Consequently, Cohen is led to rethink the use of covenantal categories without the assumption of an interruptive or interventionist relationship between God and history. For Rubenstein, the notion of a covenant with a God who can intervene and who does not, breaks the divine-human covenant. To be sure, Rubenstein wants to retain the significance of covenantal categories; but after Auschwitz they are focused among the persons who constitute the people Israel, between the generations, and voluntarily chosen within history by human partners. Singular divine action expected as a consequence of those covenants can no longer be expected. Irving Greenberg raises similar concerns and argues for a thoroughly voluntary covenant for which Jews must take responsibility as they accept their role as the covenant people Israel. In each case, the problematic nature of a God who stands outside history and intervenes as a consequence of a covenant with a people in history is brought into focus. In the light of the Shoah, that kind of covenantal configuration breaks down. Either God is portrayed as capable of acting and not doing so and therefore, a sadistic figure; or God cannot act at all—unless the covenant is incorrectly configured. A close reading of this episode reveals, even when the monarchic and interventionist patterns of the Exodus tradition are present, a strong processive and partnership model evocative of critical appropriation. The episode at the burning bush begins with encounter and moves through mutual disclosure (Moses: "Here I am"; God: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob) to call and from call to the interventive action of a representative agent empowered and accompanied by God, who chooses to be known as the One who calls forth being and life from the beginning and forever. That is, from beginning to end, the enterprise is a partnership, unfolding in greater and richer differentiation along the way and increasing responsibility for human agency in that partnership. From beginning to end, the realities indwelled by both partners are mutually constructed. From beginning to end, the reality constituted by the participating partners takes the shape of a covenantal gestalt. Where in the past the assumptions of interventionist power as the appropriate form for conceptualizing
divine power were not questioned, after Auschwitz such assumptions fall short. A thoroughly covenantal reading, however, can address the hard and unyielding questions generated by the Shoah without dissolving the covenantal gestalt that enlivens the passage and sustains its participants and followers. As a consequence, we are invited to revisit the terms we employ for addressing and talking about God, focusing on the processive and relational nature of what is revealed in this bush/in this story.

In other words, we cannot avoid asking, "What kind of covenantal agent/partner is silent in the face of six million victims, 1.5 million victims under twelve? What kind of agent (divine and/or human) watches without acting when over a million young branches and six million total are allowed to burn? Is this God just a shibboleth? A cipher for the language of covenant that breaks down in the face of massive, innocent suffering? Perhaps the best we can respond, without attempting to remove such questions, may be:

*A absent presence/a present absence . . .

A silent presence that says "I am what I am as you are what you are. . ."

A presence that is absent giving room for covenantal responsibility even if not accepted . . .

A covenantal gestalt in which attentive human response and intervention take on greater significance reflecting the very intention of creation and the life of God. . . . A place that is no place; a name that is ultimately empty of substantive content yet a promise-bound place of inclusion and care. . .

The *I AM* of divine self-disclosure is an identifying and summoning you are to Moses. Confronting the self-defining and absolute otherness of God, Moses finds himself affirmed and confirmed in his identity. The encounter is deeply relational and prefigures its unfolding covenantal character. As Peter Hodgson remarks in *Winds of the Spirit*, this encounter is the configuration of a covenantal gestalt in which God, the One Who Has the Power of Being Absolutely, calls Moses forth to be who he is.20

In addition to this mutually covenanting, relational power of *I Am-you are*, the divine name conveys a delimiting quality that I have
tried to replicate using the different cases to convey the overall gestalt. Lawrence Kushner captures this in his rendering of the divine name as “I am God—you are not!” where he alludes to the first two utterances of the Decalogue.21 Kushner also captures the open-ended quality of the imperfect action of Hebrew verbs in another rendering that he makes: “I am not yet who I am not yet.”22 We might adapt that as “I am who I am not yet.”23 Importantly, all of these associations are carried by the three-word Hebrew phrase ehyeh asher ehyeh, which interprets (but does not articulate) the divine name in the text.

Summoning Covenantal Partnership

After Auschwitz, how do we view such a project of covenantal partnership? In the Exodus tradition, Moses and the people must act for God to act as well. But the tradition remembers plagues, magical staffs, and other aspects of divine intervention into human affairs/history. After Auschwitz, we are forced to see the burdens of covenantal partnership increasingly as a human responsibility to uphold. And God’s presence is hidden in the dimensions of our humanly configured covenantal acts. Still, we must ask, “At what point do the realities of history exceed the reach of covenantal metaphors? What is the burden of this kind of partnership?”

In this regard, we must rethink how we speak of intervention. By itself, especially in the shadows of the Shoah, intervention is an insufficient covenantal category. This is most apparent now; but perhaps it has always been so, only now we are forced by what happened in our century to ask tougher questions of our theology. At the burning bush, if we have the eyes to see it, intervention is not necessarily direct but summoned. Moses is called to act in partnership with the divine will for deliverance to occur. Yet Moses is free to choose; indeed, he resists. In an age in which absence of divine intervention signals a covenantal crisis of ultimate significance, this point is critical. The intervention is not simply Moses’ alone. His intervention is inadequate and even dangerous by itself. Recall that earlier in the story Moses intervened out of his own passion—and he brought death (Exod. 2:12). He intervened again in Midian at the well and presumably struggled with his own violence yet again but kept it under control (Exod. 2:17). In this episode, he hesitates, hopefully, in a matured sense of his own capacities for harm in acting again. But
this time, he is called to act in partnership with the divine will and the
divine presence.24

After Auschwitz, intervention is problematic. Divine intervention as
well as human intervention are subject to critical scrutiny. From what
we now know about power and its abuse in the intrusive acts of
intervention, we know the limits and power of its abuse. The Nazi
actions, bureaucratic or SS directed, were intrusive interventions in
the life of European Jewry. Intervention alone is problematic. On the
other hand, no intervention is likewise a problem; we know the
dangers of its abdication as well. Consequently, power must be
rethought and transfigured. How that power is exercised and for what
purposes must be reviewed also.

Clearly the only way the covenantal language can hold is for its
human partners to accept more and more of the responsibility for
creation and for its relational qualities. (God as an intervening figure
in history must be rethought as a covenantal presence known in the
transcending gestalt of covenantal actions that reveals a quality of
mystery and significance not fully accounted for by the cumulative
historical arithmetic of meaning.) That is, there is a surplus of
meaning given by the covenantal embrace, even with greater and
greater human agency. Nonetheless, there is something sacred and
holy in the mix, in the process, happening more as a verb than as a
noun and requiring the action of human agency.

A Deepening Summons

At the burning bush Moses is summoned to life beyond himself: I
Am-you are for others in partnership with the Summoning One’s
fidelity to covenant life as embodied in the promise and deliverance of
the people Israel. Indeed, Moses had previously heard and responded
to situational needs to help others beyond himself—at the well in
Midian and before that in Egypt when he went out to his people and
saw an Egyptian beating an Israelite slave. In the earlier case, Moses
intervened without bringing deliverance. Instead, his actions brought
death to one oppressor and fear to those he tried to help. Later, at the
well, he intervened on behalf of Jethro’s daughters, who had been
driven away by a group of undesignated shepherds. In this situation,
Moses defended the daughters and watered their animals. Whether
Moses struck out at the intruders at the well, we do not know. The text
is silent about the nature of his defense, focusing only on the subsequent relationship that grew out of his respect for the women and his concern for their vulnerability. From these earlier episodes, what do we learn about Moses and his summons at the bush?

There is an ongoing and deepening dynamic in this story that we should not overlook. In recognizing it, we discover that the summons at the bush is not an isolated call but a focused and richly textured continuation of an ongoing summons that begins with our first glimpse of the adult Moses. Our first glimpse comes just after the birth and adoption narrative. The transition is abrupt and immediate as the story of the adult Moses begins; likewise, his summons:

One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting; and he said to the one who was in the wrong, "Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?" He answered, "Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid and thought, "Surely the thing is known." When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses.25

Quite simply, Moses is unable to watch the oppression of his people. Notice how the text points out the importance of Hebraic kinship in the telling of this episode. First, the Hebrew people are identified as Moses’ kinfolk. Then, Moses expresses distress at the violence between two “fellow Hebrew[s]” who were fighting. In each case, Moses cannot remain a spectator. He is called by what is happening to intervene. Later, at the well in Midian, the situation calls him into action. Once more he intervenes; this time for strangers.

In all three instances, Moses is summoned to act on behalf of others. But simply acting on behalf of others is not enough. First, Moses is summoned by the predicament of his kinfolk, and he acts violently to stop the violence. Yet the violence continues. The oppression does not end, and alienation now marks his relationship with his kinfolk as they respond to him in fear and accusation. Even so, Moses continues to be summoned by what he has failed to recognize in the vulnerabilities before him. Furthermore, acting as he
has, he has now cut himself off from Pharaoh and his adopted culture. Moses is thoroughly alienated and accused. So he flees in exile from Egypt and the people of Israel. Yet in the wilderness, he is summoned again. At the oasis in Midian, when several women are driven from the well by some shepherds, Moses comes to their defense. Once more, he is called out of himself by the vulnerability of others, though this time they are strangers, not kinfolk. He acts decisively for their welfare. How, we do not know; on this matter, the text is silent. And then, in the context of a persisting summons, Moses confronts his burning bush. But in the face of its call, he balks. Why?

In his journey from Egypt to Midian, he has lost privilege and place only to regain it again. As a person of privilege and power, Moses acted in the presence of violence with violence and failed to bring liberation from the violence that prompted his intervention. As a consequence, he lost both his privilege and his power and became the object of intended and sanctioned violence in the culture that had provided his authority and place. Then without either, he acted on his own authority in the face of need at the well in Midian, a place in which himself was a stranger. As a result, status and privilege were returned, but in limited scope, as a member of Jethro’s family, as Jethro gave him the hand of his daughter Zipporah in marriage. Once more he is taken in by a family not his own. His place is granted by others in hospitality to a stranger.

In other words, in facing the bush, Moses has faced himself; first with privilege and power, then without. He has faced himself as a man of violence trying to stop violence but failing. He has faced himself as a man who acts in the face of need on behalf of others, relying on himself as one with and then without recognized authority. What does it mean for this figure to ask, “Who am I to go to Pharaoh? . . . Who am I to act on behalf of my people whom I have earlier failed?” In the light of his actions before and after the encounter at the bush, and particularly of his deep reluctance to respond to the call to return to Egypt on behalf of his people whom he had earlier failed, we notice an important change.

The text does not tell us of Moses’ inner disposition. We do not know whether he experienced guilt or shame. To be sure, we can guess; but the text is silent in this regard. Its concern is with the summoning response. Moses is assured that he will not be alone but that he will be accompanied by the divine, covenantal partner of his people. In other words, Moses is summoned out of his limited
intentionality and self-sufficiency into partnership with the One Who Is Absolutely; he is called upon to return to the people who are his people (i.e., he is called to move from alienation to reconciliation), and in the process he is set apart for their deliverance. Moses' freedom is connected to his reconciliation with his people and their subsequent emancipation. In brief compass, the story describes Moses' personal deliverance from his past, his reconciliation with his people, and his action on behalf of their liberation. And in doing so, the story relates a deepening summons focused at the burning bush but beginning earlier and continuing beyond the encounter at the bush. Furthermore, that deepening summons is dependent upon the maturing ability of Moses to face himself and thereby become more and more available to the summons unfolding in his life.

A Perilous Enterprise

Coming to covenantal terms with this One we call God can be perilous. Moses was compelled to step into dangerous territory—physically, politically, ethnically, as well as confessionally. Returning to Egypt would be physically dangerous; his life would be at risk given the circumstances under which he fled. Returning to Egypt would bring him face-to-face with the political power of Pharaoh as an adopted insider to power who had alienated himself from that very base of support. Returning to Egypt would bring him face-to-face with his birth people, with whom he was also estranged and who certainly saw him as an outsider to their plight. And returning to Egypt would bring him face-to-face with himself and, presumably, his own sense of shame and inadequacy. Nonetheless, that was what he was called to do and accept if he were to act in partnership with this Summoning Other of the Covenant. In a very real sense, any who would accept the covenantal terms of this kind of divine-human relationship after Auschwitz must recognize the risk as well as the urgency of such an enterprise. The interventionist character of divine agency now adheres more to the power of the narrative to speak to receptive human beings who themselves must accept responsibility for any embodied intervention in human affairs. Furthermore, such intervention must occur without any divine guarantee of the outcome, since responsibility is given over to human agency. The risk and stakes thereby increase. Still, the character of this
enterprise, a covenantal gestalt of choosing agents seeking relation of perduring value, reflects the image of the Covenanting Other who has entered into this enterprise we call creation.

Classical notions of omnipotence and omniscience must yield to truly covenantal configurations of power and knowing. Presence, too, must be reconsidered. The power configured in covenant is the power of partnership. It is dependent upon the response of the covenanting other. It is not intrusive, though it can lead to intervention as any parent can undertake in regard to his or her children. Likewise, as the same parent can attest, covenantal power cannot control outcomes. In similar fashion, covenantal knowing is interactive and interdependent. Covenantal knowing recognizes what is fundamentally at stake in situations; and the covenantal knowing of God can be conceived as that knowing which recognizes with complete and absolute understanding what is covenantally at stake in any situation, but because it is covenantal it cannot know the response of the covenanted other who acts and responds in his or her freedom. Furthermore, covenantal presence, because it is a partnership gestalt as well, requires a responding other for its expression. In this kind of covenantal context we can declare with the psalmist that there is no place where such presence cannot occur (even in Auschwitz, the darkest valley of the shadow of death), but covenantal presence requires the responding partner for configuration. Moreover, because life is plural, others in their freedom can prevent still others from having the freedom to participate in this mutually constituted covenantal gestalt. This dimension of sin, an insidious consequence of evil, must always be reckoned with in a world in which something like Shoah can happen. Sin, like covenant life, is bigger and more extensive than we may have thought.

Coming to covenantal terms with God after Auschwitz is indeed a perilous undertaking. The partnership is not equal, but the disproportionate distribution of responsibilities may not be as previously conceived. Instead of God as the all-powerful sovereign who establishes a covenant with a vassal of inferior power, God now must be thought of as the Eternal Giver of Life who, in the covenantal project we call creation, ventured into the risk of relation with that which is other than God—the supreme and divine act of hospitality. Furthermore, in this venture, God seeks relation with an other (creation) and others (creatures), who, while other than God, can choose or reject relation in return. Thus, God has in effect chosen to
be limited by the ever-differentiating expressions of otherness that we know as life. Consequently, with regard to responsibility and power in this domain, God is dependent upon the covenant partnership of humanity by the very divine choice that initiates and undergirds creation.28

The summons to covenantal partnership calls for more than deliverance. The text preserves the memory that God's people were to return to the land given to Abraham, the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. According to the text:

... and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.29

The story unfolds with further elaboration of how God will accomplish this action with Moses. The text clearly gives expression to interventionist assumptions in rendering God's role and actions in the partnership, but we have re-entered the story critically. A non-interventionist reading invites a figurative appropriation of these claims: God can still be perceived as an active participant in very confrontational acts, but that participation depends upon the kind of action that unfolds. Still, even such a figurative reading must confront the literal qualities of the figure and important realities associated with the promise conveyed in the divine summons. Why would God "resolve" to "bring" Moses and his people into the land of others (Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites) as the land of Israel's promise?

Of course, we could argue that what God promised to Israel was given at the exclusion of those others. That is, the land was theirs alone and to be taken, if necessary by force. Indeed there are texts and traditions that grow from them to support this. But if we are going to read the summons at the bush as a call to covenantal partnership, surely we must look for that to be carried out as the fruit and fulfillment of its promise even in a land of others. The plain meaning of the text is clear: Israel is called to build its life of covenantal partnership in a land already populated by others.

If this dimension is an essential part of the summons at the bush,
would we not expect Moses to have seen the vulnerabilities and problems of such a venture? After deliverance, more struggle and risk would follow. After fire, perhaps more fire. Surely, we can imagine Moses crying out long before Micah (and long after, too):

What does the Eternal One require of us? To do justice? To love and pursue kindness unflinchingly? To walk humbly in our way with this summoning, covenantal Other?

Knowing what we know of the struggles the people faced with the others in this land, a covenantal partnership read in this manner would be no easy affair. Indeed, the enterprise would be perilous at best. Yet, this seems to be the higher calling to which Moses’ successors responded as Israel’s prophets reminded her people not a few times: “You are to be a light to the nations.” Torah, as well, makes the case strongly, admonishing the people of Israel to receive the stranger in her midst with hospitality, remembering that they were once strangers in Egypt.

While this reading can be supported from the summons at the bush, and would not be altogether new, it is perilous—as if the other path of conquest were not. However, after the Shoah, the risk is intensified. Furthermore, as the path to security and peace for modern Israel demonstrates, the risk remains fraught with obstacles. Survival is at stake in every step. And so we ask in even more haunting terms: “What does the Eternal One require of us now?”

Why would God resolve to bring God’s own people into the land of others as the land of their covenantal promise? Indeed, the question intensifies. And yet, in the light of what is at stake, is there any more profound way to fulfill the promise of covenant life than to embody it in such circumstances where it will be tested in the extreme? Is this the logic of the covenantal way? If so, to what is modern Israel summoned now? After Auschwitz, idealistic romanticism cannot obscure the risk of such a path. After Auschwitz, we live as Greenberg remarked: in a dialectic between Exodus and Auschwitz, Easter and Auschwitz.

The Returning Hineni

Our approach to the burning bush reflects a continuing summons to responsibility that is summed up in the Hebrew word-phrase, hineni
("here I am"). Indeed, each movement of the story builds, like a fugue, on this theme: Moses quite literally responds to the summons of the burning bush: "Here I am." God responds similarly, declaring a commensurate divine presence: "[Here] I am, the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Moses continues the thematic development, deepening his presence by revealing his resistance and perhaps his shame with a further disclosure of who it is that has declared readiness before the summoning Other. God again responds, not to Moses' question but to Moses' deepening self-revelation, "I will be with you." Finally, Moses speaks from his need to identify the One who has called him out to responsible action for his people, asking for the One's name. God discloses the divine name, declaring "'ehyeh asher 'ehyeh" ("I AM . . . in all its implications).

Now we declare, reading this story in the shadows of the Shoah and in the presence of another burning bush: "Here we are." Opening ourselves to its interrogating power, we stand accountable and covenantally bound to the witness of this searing story. We are called out of familiar territory to go back and to bring out those who dwell in this oppressive place. We are called into responsible action, to intervene—an intervention that absolutely requires our action if there is to be any intervention whatsoever. We hear ourselves called to act by the God of Moses, the God of Moses' father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob—the God of Israel. When we ask in fear and/or shame, "Who are we to undertake such steps?" we are promised nothing more or less than that this One who is who and what that One is, will be with us. Nothing more, nothing less. Presence: mutual, deeply vulnerable and covenantal presence. And when we inquire what terms we can use, what name and understanding we can give to this summoning, eternal, covenanting Other, we are given a confounding answer: 'ehyeh asher 'ehyeh.

The summons to responsible action and the responding hineni are the recurring legacy of this biblical story and the post-Shoah framework we bring to it. Together they configure a covenantal gestalt of meaning and action that points us toward a more responsible way of talking about God and founding (not to mention confounding) the covenantal partnership we identify as the ultimate goal of creation. God is the eternal and covenanting Other, Holy Other, who remains other even in the covenantal embrace of the life we know as creation. The otherness of the Other remains other, declaring, in effect, its own
I AM as it simultaneously confers a corresponding you are, summoning its encountering other to a reciprocating presence in an unfolding relational gestalt. We encounter a fundamental mystery that we cannot penetrate but that which still gives definition to our mutual relationship, leaving our inquiry unfinished but nonetheless with an orientation to life and its sacred significance before the Eternal One Who Is.

Such an understanding of covenant life (reflected in the use of the noun as an adjective modifying life) moves traditional emphases on discrete covenants to the prior and more inclusive embrace of life as the divine choice made at/in creation. Covenant, then, becomes a shaping figure for organizing and guiding how we as creatures take up our responsibility for caring for the gift of life. As well, covenant helps us conceptualize the promise of this gift and God's steadfast commitment to it. In the biblical narrative, the actual term appears first in the story of Noah and the flood, then more particularly as Abraham's legacy, and in fuller articulation at Sinai with Moses. This reading places covenant in the service of life as an expression of creation and its fundamental choice for life given in and through relation self-consciously expressed and nurtured covenantally.

Approaching Post-Shoah Holy Ground

Now how do all these twists and turns help us deal with the question that began these reflections: "How do we live with God after Auschwitz; how without?" What do we mean by God after the flames of the Shoah? Divine power, intervention, and deliverance? What ground can be holy in the shadow of Auschwitz, indeed even there? How should we approach it if we can identify and locate it? And what must we not attempt to say or do in our attempts to be faithful and honest in these critical times?

With the Shoah, we are once again called to face a burning bush that has not been consumed. However, this time, we cannot speak of only the bush that survives. What of the six million branches that have perished in the burning? What of the 1.5 million tender shoots that were consumed? Surely the God who speaks from this gestalt of suffering and need, resistance and life, must be vulnerable to the anguished cries of the branches that have been cut off from the bush and its life. The God disclosed at the burning bush is revealed in the
confirming interaction of covenantal presence. After Auschwitz, the broken branches cry out with their own silent, yet evocative *hineni*. Authentic covenantal presence expresses and addresses their cries as well.

There are several dimensions to this. Clearly any simplistic understanding of God’s relationship to history must be left behind. The thrust of modernity has led theological thinking in this direction already. The Shoah intensifies the quest. Does the burning bush story offer any help in this regard? At the heart of the story is the affirmation that God has heard the cry of his people in their oppression and therefore had reached out to Moses to act. Usually, we interpret this to mean that God has acted in history and intervened in the affairs of God’s own people to deliver them. After Auschwitz, what happens to the notion of divine intervention? More pointedly, must the affirmation that God has acted in history mean that God has intervened in history from some place outside history?

As we more typically understand it, God intervenes by deliverance, election, salvation, judgment, or revelation by entering into the domain of history from some other realm in which God dwells. As a result, history is chosen, a people is elected for covenant or delivered from oppression, life is sanctified. And God binds God’s own self to a historical relationship and to history as well. So bound, history becomes a functional constant with divine interventions becoming the historic variables. History is viewed and treated monolithically (whether given to Jews or Christians or both) and becomes the object of divine faithfulness. History is functionally guaranteed and trusted because it is the object of God’s loyalty.

The reflections in this essay express an alternative model in which God, not history, is the constant, with the divine intention for life remaining faithful to itself. History is not one general or monolithically conceived entity, but it is always particular and plural. God is trusted not to guarantee history but to be faithful to the divine intention; history, especially in the shadows of the Shoah, is not an appropriate object of trust. In fact, history has proven otherwise. It is not worthy of such trust, though it may be the arena in which trust is risked. Furthermore, history, always particular, is a relational enterprise that unfolds in accord with how its relational activity happens. Each participant is an essential component in its specific history. To say God acts in this kind of history is to locate and embrace God as a participant in a partnership that unfolds over time.
Persons, peoples, nations can move toward or away from the divine intention that God seeks from the beginning. They can even participate in it. They can also drive others away from that intention, repelling them violently and/or drawing them into other partnerships, good and bad. History and God’s participation in it are a partnership affair, an unfolding, relational process that, according to this model, God intends to be covenantal. Having committed to such a venture, intervention, apart from it, is not what God would or could do, even if intervention might be needed by individuals or any group. Rather, the intervention would have to come from other freely participating partners in the enterprise.

When we read the burning bush episode according to the latter model, we can discover, as it were, the story representing a moment in which Moses faced the revelatory significance of what was happening to his people, knowing that in order for God’s intention for life to be served, he must act, and only in his acting would God act in this divine-human partnership we call creation. More fundamentally, God’s act would be the calling forth that Moses heard as an interactive \textit{I AM—you are}. The \textit{I AM} remains as we resist and declare our own \textit{I am} and as the silent voices of the Shoah’s victims declare their violated, yet covenantal presence as well. The linguistic distinctions of Hebrew between \textit{anochi} and \textit{ani} reflect this relationship: the \textit{I (anochi)} appropriate to God and the \textit{I (ani)} appropriate to human beings. The \textit{I} of the human \textit{I am} is derivative, known, and constituted in response to a nonderivative and evocative \textit{I AM}.

The \textit{I AM} who could hear the cry of Moses’ people could hear and act only as the \textit{you are} of the responding \textit{I am} heard the resisting cry of God’s people call for divine intervention and give voice and presence to the One Who Is Absolutely. Of course, in such a reading, the great \textit{I AM} is radically vulnerable; yet this is what the notion of creation is about in the first place. The One Who Is evokes relation that embodies the covenantal intentionality of creation, which can unfold only in freely chosen partnership. Intervention is a human responsibility that expresses that partnership.

In similar fashion, the dimension of power is recast. Divine power is bracketed by the choice of creation with further discussion simply commentary of that prior decision. God has chosen otherness, otherness that sets itself apart from God with its own power to pursue life and relation in freedom. Creation is a radical risk for God, and as long as God remains faithful to creation and its relational
intentionality, that risk pertains. Power to create, once exercised, affects any expression of power thereafter.

What, then, do we learn about God, the One Who Is Absolutely? To be sure, we have learned much more about what we cannot say. The Eternal One who wanted relation enough to risk it in this venture we call creation resists any explanation without remainder. Still, we can risk saying that this Other who has chosen the otherness of creation and its attendant vulnerabilities is an embracing, covenanting Other, who calls us into covenantal partnership with others who have been entrusted with a similar invitation. As a Christian, I can even claim my place in this enterprise, acknowledging that others came before me with their articulated covenant. I join them as an included one in a much bigger story than the one I can tell. And others shall come after me. I must make room for them and their place in the vineyard of covenant life we call creation. That is the holy ground of such an encounter and the holy ground we are all called upon to cultivate. Furthermore, that ground is bigger than my own faith tradition, as well as that of others, for it is the promised ground of creation.

So when Christians like me ask, “How can I live with God after Auschwitz? How without?” We must answer, “Very carefully.” There is much we can no longer claim or dare assert that once we may have believed. The holy ground on which we gather around the burning bush still requires that we remove our shoes and approach it carefully as we learn and relearn how to say, “hinenu, here I am.”

Notes

1. Elie Wiesel’s most recent reflections on the dilemma are recorded in the first volume of his Memoirs, All Rivers Run to the Sea (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1995), 84ff.


4. Ibid., 24, 28.


7. Even if Christians see the fence around the vineyard/garden to be more inclusively framed than does Judaism, the fence is clearly identified with the people of Israel (its boundary) and should remain so identified, making its prickliness (Israel's ethno-religious particularity) even more significant—a kind of scandal for Christians. Thus there is room for disagreement and mutually distinguishable identities but with distinct rationale for commitment to each other's service to the vineyard that they serve.

8. Exodus Rabbah, 55.


10. See Michael Fishbane's discussion of the text's capacity to be the caller who calls its interpreter/reader to responsible presence and action. He notes that this awareness is conveyed in the traditional reference to the Hebrew Scriptures as Migra, which means "calling out." Michael Fishbane, Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 83.


12. Irving Greenberg, 23.

13. Darrell J. Fasching has poignantly observed that "the command to welcome the stranger occurs in the Torah thirty-six times [italics are mine]—more that any other commandment." Dare we let this doubling of eighteen go unaddressed in its significance for the life of faithfulness in the lengthening shadows of our century? The Coming of the Millennium: Good News for the Whole Human Race (Valley City: Trinity Press International, 1996), 30.

14. Greenberg, 44.

15. Ibid., 23.

16. The phrase coming to terms with carries a double meaning. On the one hand, it implies looking for the best way to speak about some matter or concern, finding the most appropriate language to express the meaning one truly seeks. On the other hand, it implies having to face up to a matter that is inescapable. There is a confronting character to this latter implication. One must deal with a matter that has reached crisis proportion. Both sets of meaning are intended in this section as it addresses the gestalt one faces when asking about God and the Shoah. Old conceptions no longer hold; traditional terms may even break. Likewise, there is no place to hide from the searing questions raised by what happened. In the burning bush story, Moses must come to terms with what happened to his people and with the God whom he encounters at the bush. That dynamic and its rendering in the narrative provide clues that our post-Shoah reading brings into bold relief, leading us to consider how the story helps us come to terms with God after Auschwitz.


23. The imperfect tense/tension of the phrase *ehyeh asher ehyeh* could also be rendered, “I am not yet who or what I am,” and “I am not yet as I shall be,” but they would not carry the ontological reality of promise as expressed in “I am who or what I am not yet.”

24. Jewish reflection will undoubtedly find challenge in its liturgical rendering of this story in most Passover *haggadot*. They do not emphasize the role or work of Moses in the Exodus story but instead focus on the liberating action of God. Moses is not mentioned by name in the telling of the story, though God’s presence is surely felt. The traditional reason: to give complete glory to God for God’s redemptive activity in the Exodus. God delivers. God acts. God redeems. Moses is simply the instrument. In the aftermath of the Shoah, this kind of traditional piety appears to be seriously challenged by the specter of 6,000,000 silent witnesses to an absent deliverer. More searching, perhaps, is the muted cry of one-and-a-half million children yet unaccountable to this way of rendering their story. Greenberg’s depiction of the Shoah as an orienting/reorienting event is profoundly unsettling in this context. The root story of *exodus* and how it is embraced and celebrated may be fundamentally undercut unless it denies the full scope of what happened in the Shoah or adjusts itself in the manner suggested here.


27. I have been significantly influenced by Peter Hodgson’s use of the term *gestalt* in his *Winds of the Spirit* as a configuring image of covenant life. He defines gestalt as “a pattern arranged, shaped, or structured from parts, producing a living, organic, plural unity—a unity of consciousness or of spirit—as opposed to a dead, mechanical identity.” See 251f.

28. While I am heavily indebted to the teaching of *tsimtsum* in this reading of the divine covenantal gestalt of God and creation, I am led in a different direction than the mystical trajectory of Lurianic kabbalism, which is the context of this teaching. Instead, I find Friedman’s argument convincing that this choice is a processual one that is not yet complete, but still unfolding in the ongoing evolution of human responsibility for the caring for creation. See his *The Disappearance of God*. R. Kendall Soulen has developed a similar approach in *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*. He argues for a covenantal theology of creation grounded in God’s intention for and fidelity to creation. The blessing of life abides even in the face of sin and the covenantal intentionality of creation will eventually be consummated by the steadfastly faithful creator of that vulnerable enterprise.

30. I have not quoted Micah 6:8 directly, though I intend to call upon Micah's words, if not his voice, in a new way.


32. See Fasching, 30.

33. Clark Williamson posits a covenantal rule of faith to guide post-Shoah Christians in understanding what actions are entrusted to human beings in this divine-human partnership: "It is only appropriate to ask God to do for us those things that only God can do; the rest is up to us. The rule is: if an action can be undertaken by God's covenant partners, it is they who will have to do it. And if some things should be done, we should do them." In A Guest in the House of Israel: Post-Holocaust Church Theology (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1993), 22.

34. See Peter Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit*, 137-50, where he characterizes the gestalt-like configuration of divine action in and through the life and ministry of Jesus. Adopting his notion of gestalt-like configurations, we can speak of a covenantal project of creation that is called forth into being and life from the beginning by a divine Other who in the process of giving life takes on covenantal configurations of Being-in-relation with the other(s) and otherness of creation and its correlative Being.

35. See Fishbane, *Garments of Torah*, 19-32, for a brief description of the kivyekhol midrashic strategy that is being followed here.

36. Ibid., 147ff.
See the Salvation of YHWH: Lectionary Studies in Exodus

Introduction

Exodus. Liberation. Freedom. Exciting words, aren’t they? When I hear them, what flashes through my mind are the image of Charleton Heston leading the Israelites through the divided waters, the stirring sounds of the theme song from the movie Exodus, the voice of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the challenge of liberation theology.

The texts for this study recount for us the biblical story we know as Exodus. In many ways it is the story in the Bible. It is the basis of the Jewish ritual of Passover and the foundation of the Christian ritual of Eucharist. One Old Testament commentator refers to it as “the root experience,” the experience from which the rest of the story of Israel grows.

But what is this story, really about? It’s a familiar story, so we probably think we know what it’s about. Some of you reading this have probably already preached a sermon or two on these texts. And you do so because you love this story and can’t seem to get enough of it. Some of you, having preached those sermons, might think, Why bother? What’s the point? It’s like preparing again for Christmas and

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Easter. It's a story so familiar that finding something new to say is such a stretch we would rather change churches so we can preach the old sermon again rather than go through that process. Yet, as one of the central stories of our faith, it is a story that we come back to again and again. So whether it's a favorite story or an old, tired, worn-out story for you, I hope that, God willing, we will hear God's word afresh.

To ask the question, "What is this story about, really?" is not so rhetorical as it may seem at first glance. In the texts under discussion three Hebrew words are used to describe the action of this story. The first to appear is a form of "nìl," which occurs in Exodus 3:8. The dictionary definition for how it is used here is "to pull out, save." In a random sampling of seven translations it is translated as "snatch," "rescue," "deliver." The most common word in the lectionary texts (3:8, 10, 11, 12) is a form of "yi*". The dictionary definition given is "to cause to go out, lead out." This is the word best captured by the Greek "exodus" in the sense of "exit." (On Olympic Airways, the Greek national airline, the emergency exit doors are all clearly marked "EXODUS.") Again, in my sampling of translations it is translated as "lead out," "bring out," "free." The last word is "yi*", which occurs in 14:30. This is the root from which the names Joshua, Isaiah, and Jesus derive and is usually translated "to save." The dictionary defines it as "to help, save from danger." The various translations I consulted translated it as "rescue," "save," "deliver."

Is exodus, then, about rescuing, delivering, saving, freeing, or bringing out? Note that the same English words, "deliver" and "rescue," are used to translate two different Hebrew words. And where does liberation fit into this? What this story is about is captured not in some abstract meaning of a word but in the action of the story. The issue is not "what does this word mean?" but "what has God done?"

I want to pay particular attention to the role of God in the story. How does God accomplish this exodus? What has God done? What does it mean to "see the salvation of YHWH?" In order to answer these questions, I will focus on the texts as a narrative, or story. When the text is viewed as a story, we can examine characters, plot, and action. The issue of whether the exodus "really" happened—the question of historicity—although an interesting question, will not be of concern. A close examination of the text suggests that this also is not the concern of the biblical narrative. It is clear that what
we have in this story is an *impressionistic picture or dramatized account* of "what really happened." But this means that, in its final form, what we are left with is a drama. So let us allow the drama to unfold.

Having said that, we should note that the lectionary cycle is not always conducive to this task. To gain the scope and effect of the story of exodus, we should read at a minimum the first fifteen chapters of the book of Exodus. What we have before us are sections of five of those chapters. In order to maintain the integrity of the narrative it will necessary at times to comment on more of the text than is present in the lection.

My interpretation of these lections is guided by two mottoes: “Context Is Everything” and “Interpretation Matters.” The first motto refers to the fact that our social location, the context in which we live, makes a difference in how we interpret. As I have worked on these texts, two contexts have been primarily in my mind. One is the context of the struggle for liberation by Christians in Latin America and that struggle’s expression in liberation theology. I have used George Pixley’s work on Exodus (see “Suggested Readings”) as an expression of this context. The other context involves the place where I did much of the initial research and writing for these studies, the city of Jerusalem. What makes this context so significant is that I spent most of my time with Palestinian Christians, for whom the exodus story is a “text of terror” rather than a story of liberation.

The context of Jerusalem leads to my second motto, which reflects a comment by Elisabeth Schüessler Fiorenza in which she states that “all theology knowingly or not is by definition always engaged for or against the oppressed.” In other words, how we interpret scripture has a real impact on people’s faith and lives; there is no such thing as “disinterested” interpretation.

Another of my contexts connects with this. I teach at a Quaker seminary which takes seriously the Quaker testimony of nonviolence and pacifism. Nearly every day my students raise questions about the “violence” they observe in the text. In light of the Quaker context in which I work and the Jerusalem context in which I spend a great deal of my time, I shall pay particular attention in my commentary to a shadow side of the story that is normally overlooked: the ways the story of deliverance from Egypt can be a story of oppression as well as liberation.
The Absence of God.

There are many causes for oppression. In this story of liberation, oppression begins silently and unobtrusively. History is forgotten. "And a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." Memories of friendship and succor between Egyptians and the children of Israel are lost in the morning mists of the Nile. And because friendship is forgotten, this "people," these "children of Israel," are seen as a threat by this new king. The story gives no evidence that the children of Israel are, in fact, a threat to Pharaoh. Rather, it is a matter of perception. All Pharaoh sees is how numerous they are. Because there may be more of them than Egyptians, he sees them not as potential friends but as potential enemies. "They will increase, and, in the event of war will join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Because Pharaoh perceives them as a threat, it is a threat to all of Egypt, a national security crisis. And so Egypt ("Let us") must deal with this people, shrewdly, cunningly, wisely. That's how oppression begins. Whether we have forgotten our history together or have remembered it for far too long or have misremembered it or for some other reason altogether we become unable to see those who are "them" and not "us" as future friend; we see them only as future enemy. So we must "deal" with them. Human history has no shortage of methods for dealing shrewdly with those we think may be inclined to fight against us. Ethnic cleansing, genocide, rape, famine, a ghetto, slavery, land confiscation, to name only a few, are some of the preferred methods in our time.

This new king's initial solution to the problem was to make their labor harder. "They set taskmasters over [Israel] to oppress them with forced labor." The goal is clearly to reduce some of that large number. Perhaps he was hoping that the oppressive labor would kill off some. Or maybe that the harshness of the work would reduce the potency of the men, thus leading to fewer pregnancies. Maybe the women would miscarry. And to the surprise of Pharaoh, though not to anyone else, his plan does not work. Not only did Pharaoh not solve the "problem"
but “the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread.” We are not told the how or why of this. We do not know if it is divine intervention. It just is so. Perhaps for those who are oppressed and powerless before the mighty, birthing is the one thing left that can be done in relative freedom. The power to give birth is all the power they had left. But it is power enough to thwart Pharaoh’s plans.

Another glitch in Pharaoh’s plan arises when he speaks to two midwives. Although the Pharaoh is never named, we learn the names of these two women: Shiphrah and Puah. Why is it that the mighty king of Egypt is speaking to two women whose task it is to assist in childbirth? Since the plan to reduce the number of Hebrews has not worked, Pharaoh resorts to Plan B. He commands the midwives to kill any Hebrew boy that is brought to birth, but girls may live. This plan has clear intent. Boys who grow up to be men may fight against Pharaoh.

But Shiphrah and Puah refuse to follow the king’s command. They are perhaps the first biblical example of civil disobedience. The only reason the text gives for their refusal is that they “feared God.” In a modern midrash on the story of the midwives some content is given to this expression. Because Shiphrah and Puah fear God, they believe in providing comfort and safety to women in childbirth. They believe that it doesn’t matter how fine a house one is born into and that Hebrew women are no different from Egyptian women. They are committed to caring for life, not taking life away. And concerns override even Pharaoh’s concerns that these Hebrew boys may one day fight against him.

Like the Hebrews giving birth, Shiphrah and Puah use the power that they have, that is available to them, to thwart the plans of Pharaoh.

The story now moves from the survival of all Hebrew baby boys to the survival of a particular Hebrew baby boy. Pharaoh now tries Plan C. He commands all his people to cast every son they see born into the Nile. A particular Hebrew woman conceives and gives birth to a son and sees that what she has created is good, like God is able to declare good the divine creation out of chaos in Genesis 1. Like other Hebrew women and the midwives, she thwarts Pharaoh’s plans in the simple act of conceiving and giving birth. When “she could hide him no longer” she creates an ark and sets him in the Nile. The baby’s sister stand at a distance “to see what would happen to him.”

This is an astonishing act by the mother. Who is such a woman that she would give up her baby and then stand back to allow something else to happen? One of my students used the story of Moses’ mother

SEE THE SALVATION OF YHWH
in her ministry with incarcerated women. They identified with Moses’ mother. These women understood that sometimes when you’re in jail (in bondage) it is best to give up one’s baby to someone else who can love, nurture, and care for it when you can’t.

Like those before them, Moses’ mother and sister use the power they have to thwart the plans of Pharaoh.

Pharaoh’s daughter happens to be bathing along the river. Is this coincidence, divine providence, or cunning planning by Moses’ mother? We don’t know. But Pharaoh’s daughter sees this ark and has her maid retrieve it. When she opens it she “spares” or “has compassion” over the baby boy she finds inside. And she spares, has compassion over, one of her father’s sworn enemies. (The Hebrew can convey both meanings.) “This must be one of the Hebrews children.” Not only does she have the emotion of compassion but she takes the action to spare him. With the assistance of Moses’ sister the princess arranges to have the baby’s mother nurse him. When he is weaned, she has him brought to the palace and raises him as her son. If the midwives engage in civil disobedience we might say that Pharaoh’s daughter commits treason. She knowingly goes against the policies of the state in order to effect this rescue.

Pharaoh’s daughter can also be seen as an early biblical example of a group of people who will be known in later Judaism as “righteous Gentiles.” A particular example of a righteous Gentile in our era would be someone like Oskar Schindler, who rescued Jews from the Nazi death camps. In Norma Rosen’s midrash on Pharaoh’s daughter, Bitiah (the name Rosen gives her) states, “They say that even in the very worst times, every Egyptian woman had her Jewish child, did you know that?”

Thus Rosen raises the possibility that Pharaoh’s daughter was not the only Egyptian to rescue an enemy son from death.

Like the women before her, Pharaoh’s daughter makes use of the power that she has to thwart the plans of Pharaoh.

Perhaps what is most astonishing about the acts of these women and this part of the story is the total absence of God. God does not speak. God does not act. God does not command. God does not even enter the story until the last two verses of chapter 2, when finally God hears the groaning of the people and remembers the divine covenant with the ancestors. God looks upon them and notices them. Isn’t this the usual way of the world? Oppression in all its forms and manifestations continues unabated, and God doesn’t appear to be doing anything about it.
This is the world in which most of us are engaged in acts for peace and justice. But we are also often immobilized by the enormity of the injustices that exist. “Compassion fatigue” is the new term of the nineties. There’s so much oppression, and it’s so pervasive. How can we ever make a dent or make a difference?

The story of these women tells us that in the face of Pharaoh, we can still save one baby. Many in our churches are overwhelmed by problems facing our world and end up becoming totally pessimistic about any possibilities for change or newness. How do we avoid being overcome? What can we do? We can do what we have the power and ability to do. It may not seem like much and that it won’t make one bit of difference to the pharaohs of this world, but the story tells us that these seemingly insignificant acts are really the beginning of salvation. The beginning of salvation may be small, seemingly random acts of kindness accomplished behind the scenes. But even something hidden for many years may eventually lead to liberation. You just never know.

August 23, 1999—Proper 17
Exodus 3:1-15
Ps. 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c
Rom. 12:9-21
Matt. 16:21-28

The God Who Hears.
This next lection illustrates the limitations of the lectionary. Last Sunday the story ends with Moses growing up in the household of Pharaoh. This Sunday the story begins with Moses shepherding the sheep of his Midianite father-in-law in the wilderness! So how did Moses get from Pharaoh’s palace to the desert? That transition is omitted by the lectionary. In a sermon, you might briefly remind the congregation that in the intervening verses Moses kills an Egyptian who is beating a Hebrew and has fled to the wilderness as a fugitive from justice.

To keep the focus on the narrative question of how liberation happens, you may want to include 2:23-25 with this lection. These are pivotal verses to this story of rescue. The king of Egypt dies. The Israelites cry out under the burden of their oppression. That cry rises up to God. God, who has been so mysteriously absent, now hears their
groaning and remembers the divine covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. At this moment of remembering, God takes notice of the Israelites.

These brief verses raise interesting theological questions, such as why God hadn’t been paying attention before. Unfortunately, these interesting theological questions aren’t the questions the text is concerned with. Instead, what we learn is that a simple, causal relationship exists in the divine/human relationship: when the people groan and cry out, God hears and notices. We also learn something about the relationship between the Israelites and God. We learn that these people and God have a prior relationship, a covenant relationship. The covenant is named: the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God is not going to rescue just any group of slaves in this story. Rather, God heeds the cries of a people with whom God has an already established relationship. Since we know the story, we know that this relationship includes a divine promise (Gen. 12:1-3), which is currently thwarted by Israel’s presence in Egypt and Pharaoh’s oppression of the Israelites. This promise means that God will take the side of Israel in the ensuing conflict.

In these three verses God becomes active. God hears. God remembers. God notices. That divine activity leads into the present lection. The reader suspects that since God has taken notice of this situation God will now do something about it.

God acts to commission a leader, whose job it will be to bring the people out of the land of Egypt. This “call narrative” follows a well-established pattern of (1) divine appearance (vv. 1-4a); (2) introductory word explaining the circumstances that necessitate the call (vv. 4b-9); (3) divine commission (v. 10); (4) objection (v. 11); (5) reassurance (v. 12a); and (6) sign (v. 12b). Significantly, liberation requires human as well as divine action. God does not accomplish the release of the slaves from Egypt solo. Moses must go to the people. Pixley suggests that any revolution must have organization. This is what Moses is to accomplish. He is to approach the elders and encourage them to take action against their oppression.

Rather than give attention to each aspect of the call narrative, I will instead highlight various aspects of this narrative that have caught my attention. This means that I will omit a great deal of other homiletical possibilities.

Let us first focus on the place where this divine encounter and commission occurs. The issue of place is the issue of where it is that
Moses, and we, encounter God. There are two ways to see this. One way is to highlight the “ordinariness” of the place.

*There is no temple nearby where he might expect a divine appearance, no sign that this is a holy place. Unlike the owner of the sheep, Moses is not a priest or a prophet; it is an ordinary, everyday journey for him with no “religious” intentions. . . Yet it would not be the last time that God appeared to shepherds in a wilderness with an announcement of peace and goodwill. It would not be the last time that God chose a nontraditional, non-religious setting for a hearing for the word.*

In other words, nothing signifies that this might be some special place where one might go in order to hear the voice of God. Rather, Moses encounters God unexpectedly while going about his daily work of tending the sheep. The story makes me wonder as I go about my daily work what it takes to get my attention long enough so that I consider whether I should turn aside “in order to see this great sight.” How many times might there have been a burning bush right in my path and I was too distracted by my work to notice?

Another way to look at this place is to focus on its “extra-ordinariness,” “God showed himself to Moses and called him in the savage surroundings of the desert and in the anguish of exile rather than in the comfortable atmosphere of Pharaoh’s palace where Moses had been reared.” In other words, this is a place that is outside what Moses had been accustomed to. This place is desert and wilderness, not the lush fertile fields of the Nile delta. In this place Moses is a fugitive, not a “Prince of Egypt.” Why did God not call Moses while he still resided in Pharaoh’s palace? Perhaps ensconced in the world of privilege to which he was accustomed, he was deaf and blind to YHWH’s presence. Only when his life is seriously disrupted does he take notice of a bush that burns yet is not consumed. I know that sometimes my life has to take a dramatic turn that shakes me out of my complacency and comfort before I become aware of the nearness of the divine presence.

Having gained Moses’ attention, God now states the problem and the divine intent. In rapid succession the text says that God “observed” the people’s affliction, “heard” their cry, and “knew” their pain. Seeing and hearing leads to knowing. How often in our own lives do
we finally see oppression and hear the stories of pain firsthand and then finally come to know the injustice that exists and set ourselves to do something about it? In the same way, God’s seeing, hearing, and knowing leads God to action. “I have come down.” This clearly implies the ancient view of the cosmos that locates the gods “up” in heaven. What it can say in our day is that God comes and is present among us. God becomes Immanuel, moves into the huts and hovels, and resides with the slaves. But there is a purpose to this change in divine residence. God comes down “to deliver” (niš) Israel from Pharaoh. The goal of this divine action is removal of the people from their situation. In this instance, niš is an excellent word choice. It suggests that God is about to snatch Israel right out from under the thumb of their oppressor, Pharaoh, almost like you pick up an object and move it to another location.

Verse 8 is pivotal in this story of exodus. The first half of the verse rings exuberantly with the sounds of hope and promise. First we hear that the people are to be brought out from that land. Then we hear that they are, in fact, going to be moved to another location. God is going to bring them “to a good and broad land, to a land flowing with milk and honey.” In this way we discover that deliverance is not just from oppression. We are not just delivered from something, but we are delivered to something. In this case, the deliverance is from one land to another. From the land of Egypt, a land of oppression and slave labor, to a good land, a land more akin to Eden.

This verse raises difficult and disturbing questions about liberation. The second half of the verse raises a discordant note. The land to which the Israelites will go is “. . . the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.” This land is not just a good land; it is an already occupied land. At this point liberation becomes complicated. Surely it is great to be delivered from oppression. But what about this place the Israelites are going to? What is going to happen to all those “-ites” who are living there? The story doesn’t tell us at this point. It is only later we will find that the divine plan is to remove forcibly the prior inhabitants in order to make room for this group of slaves.

Having spent a considerable amount of time in the Holy Land with Palestinian Christians, I find this verse troublesome. Palestinians read this verse as the cause of their own oppression. They identify in this story not with the slaves in Egypt but with the Canaanites who are about to be overrun, overthrown, and occupied by the Israelites.
There are problems with this reading of the story that I won’t go into here. However, I cannot deny that this is the way many Israelis read the story, especially among the more conservative and right-wing political groups prominent in the government. You only have to listen for a few minutes to hear the argument that the reason there can be no Palestinian sovereignty or self-determination and no return of confiscated land to Palestinians is because God promised Israel this land; therefore, it is Israel’s. It doesn’t matter that the Palestinians who have been displaced and whose land has been taken have lived on that land for centuries. Some political factions in Israel read this verse very literally. Since these factions have the political and economic power to do so, it becomes the justification for the atrocious, outrageous, and often brutal treatment of others of God’s children. Thus, this verse today has very real political, social, and economic consequences in the Holy Land.

Of course, this reading of the text in contemporary Israel also has its roots in Nazi Germany and the Holocaust of World War II. The positive and hopeful first half of this verse encouraged European Jews to flee persecution and to establish the modern state of Israel. Yes, they found liberation, but with disastrous consequences for others.

Because of these real consequences of one people’s liberation Michael Prior takes Latin American liberation theologians to task in his book, *The Bible and Colonialism*. Prior argues that Latin American liberation theology has selectively and naively adopted the Exodus paradigm. In particular he notes that Latin American liberation theologians consistently omit the second half of verse 8.

Prior overstates his case. It is not true that every liberation theologian does this. However, in discussing one prominent theologian’s use of this text, Prior’s conclusion speaks to the concerns this verse raises: “It appears that the villagers are encouraged to assume the fortunes of the liberated slaves, without being burdened with the guilt of dispossessing others.”

Whether you agree with either the Palestinian or the Israeli position or with Prior’s view of liberation theology, this verse suggests that we ought to examine closely the consequences of our liberation. Are we going to selectively and naively adopt the Exodus paradigm? Are we going to assume the fortunes of liberation while being burdened with the guilt of the aftermath of our liberation? Are we even going to ask the question of what the consequences of our liberation might mean for others?

Fretheim states that the exodus story is a story of death and new
life. This is a familiar and dominant Christian theme expressed in Christ’s death and resurrection. It is also a theme found elsewhere in the Old Testament, especially in the “dry bones” passage of Ezekiel 37. There will be new life for the Israelites, but only at the expense of the death of the inhabitants of the land. This theme will become more explicit in the next lection, which includes mention of the death of the Egyptian firstborn. We don’t often contemplate this aspect of liberation, of new life. Is it true that someone else must die in order for me/us to have new life? Does it mean the death of the one who has brought me so much “death” already? Or does it mean the death of innocent children or the deaths of persons who had nothing to do with my oppression but just happen to be inhabiting the space in which I now wish to reside? What does this mean? We must contemplate that this death and new life is not something abstract, metaphysical, or spiritual. That is, I do not just die to the thing in myself that binds me, such as addiction. No. This text has real, concrete, sociopolitical consequences. People die.

One of the issues at stake here is the question of what James A. Sanders calls “dynamic analogy.” This is the process by which we consciously identify with the character or characters in the tradition who are most representative of our own condition. Clearly when we read this story most of us identify with the slaves. Palestinians say to me that they identify with the Canaanites. What role are you taking on in reading this text? With whom do you identify? Are we slaves? Are we Pharaoh? Are we Canaanites? Most of you reading this will be educated, middle- to upper-class Americans, those who live in a land flowing with milk and honey. Whom have we replaced? Whom are we keeping out? How are we using our power? At this point I don’t have any good answers. What I do know is that it is time we asked the questions.

August 30, 1999—Proper 18
Exodus 12:1-14
Ps. 149
Rom. 13:8-14
Matt. 18:15-20

_God as Destroyer._
From the last lection until this lection much of the plot of this story of deliverance has been omitted by the lectionary. The primary part of
the story that is not read (5:1-6:1; 7:8-11:10) has to do with Moses’
return to Egypt, the confrontation with Pharaoh, and the resulting
plagues. Many interesting theological issues are contained in this
material, including the escalating violence and destructiveness of the
plagues and the intriguing theological conundrum of God’s hardening
Pharaoh’s heart. This omitted block of material also has plot
significance for this lection, and you may wish to recount a summary
of the omitted narrative as a lead-in to chapter 12.

In the previous lection Moses’ was commissioned by YHWH to go
to Pharaoh so that he might “bring my people, the Israelites, out of
Egypt” (3:10). Moses has gone to Pharaoh, but nothing has happened.
Israel has received this promise from YHWH of deliverance out of a
situation of oppression. But so far, the method for accomplishing that
promise hasn’t yielded much progress. Plague after plague is heaped
upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians and nothing happens. Israel is still in
bondage. When will YHWH make good upon this promise?

Chapter 11 opens with YHWH saying to Moses, “I will bring one
more plague upon Pharaoh . . . afterwards he will let you go from
here.” Yet once again the fulfillment of God’s promise is delayed.
Before that final plague happens in 12:29, chapter 12 interrupts the
story. One commentator suggests that this interruption is “a digression
which comes across to the reader as a postponement, a delay of
deliverance. And the reader anxiously wonders whether stalling is not
tantamount to shelving.” In this moment of “delay,” our text for
today occurs: the institution of the Passover meal on the eve of the last
great plague and Israel’s exodus from Egypt.

“This month shall mark for you the beginning of months. It shall be
the first month of the year for you” (v. 2). The opening of this lection
raises the issue of time. It also closes with a focus on time. “This day
shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a
festival to the YHWH; throughout your generations you shall observe
it as a perpetual ordinance” (v. 14). What we learn about this time is
that it is cyclic and recurring time as well as sacred time. It is sacred
because it is instituted by God. It is recurring, and so binding in
perpetuity, because this day and month will happen every year. But
most significantly the calendrical reckoning specifically recreates or
reorders time. This is to be the first month of the year. Israel is to mark
and celebrate the beginning of a new year with the Passover festival.

Why should this month begin the new year? Because this is the
month that marks the new beginning of life for Israel. The purpose of
this festival is to remember that in this month Israel won its freedom from bondage. This event is a new beginning for Israel. It is a divine act of new creation and is so momentous that it is remembered by marking the beginning of a new year.

It is like the marking of B.C. and A.D. Christians are celebrating the beginning of a new millennium because, for us, an event occurred two thousand years ago that we believe was a new beginning, a divine act of new creation so momentous that it was remembered by reordering and recreating time. Similarly, Muslims have a tradition in which time is reordered. The Muslim calendar starts from the date of Mohammed’s journey to Jerusalem.

There is another important aspect to this time. The ritual described here is narrated as occurring for the first time. In this first instance it has a very specific function, to protect the people of Israel from God’s destruction of the firstborn. But Israel is to keep this festival forever. Clearly, the next time it is celebrated it will not serve the same purpose. In verse 14, the festival is described as a memorial or remembrance.

The theme of remembering occurs again later in the chapter. When the next generation asks “What do you mean by this observance?” (v. 26), they are to be told, “It is the passover sacrifice to the L ORD, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses” (v. 27). Thus this is a time to remember what has happened in the past. The people of Israel are to remember that they were once slaves in Egypt and that on “this day” God delivered them from bondage.

But it is more than a time of remembering a historical event. Because it is perpetual, this event is not limited to just one moment in time. This moment looks not only to the past but also to the future. The remembrance of exodus creates expectations. The certainty that YHWH saved his people in the past offers hope for fresh saving acts of YHWH. The forward-looking aspect of this time suggests that deliverance by God is not a single occurrence but an ongoing reality.

The presence of this “pause” in the story of exodus in order to institute a ritual observance of the event suggests the importance of ritualizing moments of deliverance and new beginnings in our own lives in meaningful ways. In our US American national story of deliverance, the Fourth of July and the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., are such ritual moments when we both remember the
historical event and also hold in our hearts and minds the hope for ongoing freedom and the continuing struggle for civil rights for all US Americans. The Christian rituals associated with Christmas, Easter, and Eucharist also serve the same function. As we remember God’s past acts of incarnation, resurrection, and deliverance, we also celebrate that these events are not just one moment in time. We have the hope that God will continue to be incarnate among us, to bring about resurrection, and to deliver us from oppression. As we experience salvation, deliverance, and rescue, perhaps we should take a moment to “pause.”

Another interesting aspect of this ritual is the fact that this “pause” occurs before the people have actually left Egypt. It seems strange to create such a ritual before deliverance has even happened. Shouldn’t this be what happens in chapter 15, after the people are safely on the other side of the sea? That may seem to be the logical moment in which to institute a festival to remember the deliverance from Egypt. But no, it happens in the land of captivity. What could it mean for us to commemorate what God is in the process of doing as well as what God has already accomplished?

I am not going to focus on the specifics of the Passover ritual or on the significance of the sacrifice of the lamb and the marking of the doorposts with blood. The commentaries listed in the Suggested Readings can give further information on those issues. Instead, I will offer a few unrelated comments about the passage.

One of the characteristics of this festival is that it is a family ritual. It takes place not in a temple or a sanctuary but in the house. But the directions are also to the “congregation of Israel.” The family is not isolated from the rest of the believing community. In fact, if the family is too small to be able to consume an entire lamb on its own, then the family should invite its neighbor to join them. In this way the corporate worship community comes together in order to ensure that the needs of all are met.

The directions are given in a speech from YHWH and they are “for you [plural].” The recipients of these directions are “the whole congregation of Israel,” “the whole assembled congregation of Israel.” This is in group/out group language. It has exclusive characteristics. In other words, this particular group of slaves in Egypt is to observe this statute. Perhaps not all of God’s acts of deliverance are the same. My group’s deliverance may not look like your group’s deliverance. This should make us cautious about applying the exodus paradigm to all
situations of oppression. Just because God chose to deliver this group in this manner, does that mean that God will deliver all groups in the same way?

Finally, one of my colleagues commented that he has always been struck by the fact that in spite of all the symbolic and theological meaning associated with the Passover, it also had the rather commonplace practicality of providing the people with a solid meal before hitting the road. Just as God would provide the manna and water the people needed for sustenance in the wilderness, God now provides them with the sustenance they need to begin their journey. Sometimes in our quest for liberation we can forget that something as practical as a solid meal is needed to sustain us on the way.

This brings us to a part of the narrative that, as with the previous lection, raises a discordant note in this story of liberation. I titled this section “God the Destroyer.” Vv. 12-13 remind us of the means by which YHWH delivered the people of Israel. “I will pass through the land of Egypt that night. And I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human and animal beings; on all the gods of Egypt I execute judgments. I am YHWH. The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.”

Just as when we discovered in the previous lection, that there would be tragic consequences in the aftermath of Israel’s liberation, in this lection we discover that Israel’s liberation has tragic consequences before Israel has even left Egypt. As Gowan notes, “There is no thought here of appealing to principles of freedom or equality or fairness . . . Neither does the idea that Pharaoh might be compensated for his loss ever appear.” Instead, “God knows that he will have to take destructive action against Pharaoh. The Egyptian king must be forced to give up these people.” What God does is nothing short of an appalling environmental disaster. In the plague narratives that are omitted by the lectionary, not only is it Pharaoh and his officials, the responsible parties, who suffer but also the peasants who had nothing to say about the system in which they lived. The country as a whole is left desolate. In the first plague, the Nile grew foul and the fish died (7:21). In the second, frogs died and the land stank (8:13f). In the fourth, the land was ruined because of the flies (8:24). In the fifth, the livestock died (9:6). In the seventh, people, animals, and vegetation were struck down, shattered (9:25). In the eighth, the locusts stripped
any vegetation that was left (10:17). Then, in the tenth plague, the firstborn of every family died (12:29). “After all this, the report of the drowning of the army seems rather anticlimactic, although the Old Testament never tells it that way. Wasn’t this overkill, when the aim of it all was presumably just to make it possible for a group of immigrants to leave the country?”

This occasion for the Passover of YHWH shows the shadow side of this story of deliverance. This is a story of both death and new life. The actual recounting of the slaughter of the firstborn is also omitted from the lectionary readings, but verse 12 tells us that it will happen. (Actually, we know as early as 4:21-23 that the death of the firstborn will eventually occur.) The text is clear that YHWH is the destroyer. This blood, the blood of the firstborn, is on YHWH’s hands: “I will strike down.” Once again, someone else must die for the sake of Israel’s salvation. The following poem reflects this:

\[
\text{I was touched by your baby smile} \\
\text{When you looked up at me from the bed of reeds.} \\
\text{I asked my maid to pick you up quickly} \\
\text{Because I had seen a crocodile} \\
\text{Softly gliding downstream towards you.} \\
\text{I gave you a name, a second life,} \\
\text{And an education worthy of a people} \\
\text{Who had harnessed the Nile,} \\
\text{Plotted the course of the stars in the sky,} \\
\text{And built the pyramids.} \\
\text{Without you there would have been no Exodus} \\
\text{and no ten commandments.} \\
\text{Now, tell me, Moses,} \\
\text{In order to liberate your people} \\
\text{Was it necessary to kill} \\
\text{All our first born baby boys,} \\
\text{Including my own?}^{14}
\]

In the midrash on Pharaoh’s daughter by Norma Rosen that I mentioned above, Bitiah later complains, “Yet I ask you, wouldn’t it have been appropriate if some Jew came forward to save an Egyptian as I had done to save a Jew?” In fact, Rosen has her
encounter Yokheved, Moses' mother, on that night and asks her, "My brother is the first-born of Pharaoh, and will die on this terrible night! Can you not save him as I saved your son?" Yokheved only cries and runs away.

The exodus comes about as a direct consequence of the slaughter of the Egyptian firstborn on the night of the Passover (12:31, 41, 51). This was the decisive event of the Exodus. It took a drastic event to make this deliverance possible. It was an event so catastrophic that even Pharaoh could not ignore it. The text hints that this event is an "eye for an eye." The death of the Egyptian baby boys corresponds to the prior death of the Hebrew baby boys. But what does it mean that innocent children must die for our deliverance?

September 6, 1999—Proper 19
Exodus 14:19-31
Ps. 114
Rom. 14:1-12
Matt. 18:21-35

God the Savior.
We tend to think of the crossing of the sea as the climax of the story. It is for filmmakers. Just witness the recent film on this text, Prince of Egypt, in which the crossing of the sea is not only the climax of the story but also the most visually stunning moment of the film. But if we keep our focus on the question of how liberation happens we discover that 12:31-41 recounts that Israel left Egypt on that day of passover. Pharaoh finally says, "Go away!" and they go! "... all the companies of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt" (12:41b). In a prosaic manner we are told that the people took up their kneading bowls, plundered the jewelry and clothing of the Egyptians, and left in haste. In that rather inauspicious moment Israel makes the transition from being slaves in Egypt to being a free people.

If that is the moment that brings freedom, then where does the crossing of the sea fit into this story of liberation? The story of the crossing of the sea reminds us that "Exodus, like any revolutionary movement, was a process that developed over a certain period of time and in distinct steps and each step has characteristics of its own." The lections so far have described a number of those steps—nonviolent resistance, civil disobedience, getting God's attention,
God’s getting Moses’ attention, command, leadership, ritual, divine acts, leaving. Pixley titles his chapter that includes this lection “Perils of the Passage to the Promised Land.” Leaving Egypt is one step in that passage, but the people have a long way to go before they arrive in that land flowing with milk and honey. In a between moment, the Israelites encounter the sea.

The lection omits not only how the Israelites come to be by the shore of the Yam Suf (Reed Sea) but why this spectacular display by YHWH is necessary. We need to deal with the intervening material in order to gain appreciation for the lectionary material. Therefore, we shall look at the whole of chapter 14 and not just the specific lectionary reading.

After the Israelites leave Egypt, God leads them around by the way of the wilderness (13:18). Eventually they are told to encamp “by the sea” (14:2). The story recounts both that YHWH hardened Pharaoh’s heart (14: 4, 8) and that Pharaoh changed his mind about releasing his slaves (14:5). Either way, the result is that Pharaoh assembles an army and pursues the Israelites.

As Pharaoh approaches, the Israelites look up. Behold, the Egyptians were marching after them. We are told that the Israelites cried out “in fear” (14:10). That shouldn’t come as a terrible surprise, for the Israelites find themselves between that proverbial rock and a hard place (or the devil and the deep blue sea). There was sea in front of them and an army of angry Egyptians behind them. It looked like a no-win situation! They are not yet free of Pharaoh. The possibility of freedom is about to be crushed out of existence. What a cruel, cosmic joke! God promises deliverance from bondage and a good life in a good land. But what do they get? Deliverance from bondage into certain death.

The people then do what seems only reasonable. They complain. “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?” (14:11). The moment is fraught with chaos and danger. In that moment they would rather go back to Egypt than move forward. I find Pixley’s description of this moment captures their dilemma:

It is one thing, in the tranquility of encampment, to lay plans for confronting enemies, and quite another to see them bearing down on you with their fearsome chariots. Faced with this
redoubtable spectacle, some will regret ever having embarked upon this accursed revolution. And so we have the first of many times that movements will arise calling in question not only the tactics of the moment, but the entire project of leaving Egypt in search of a land where milk and honey flow.\textsuperscript{16}

Moses responds to this complaint by saying to the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today” (14:13a). Although there are numerous homiletical possibilities for this verse alone, I want to focus on the way this response uses one of the words for liberation, \( y\check{s} \). The \textsc{nrsv} translates this word “deliverance.” But as I discussed in the Introduction, the root \( y\check{s} \) is the root that is most commonly rendered in English as “salvation.” The translation of the \textsc{nrsv} clearly intends to convey what the translator considers to be the content of salvation. Salvation is about deliverance, being set free. You will need to decide if the \textsc{nrsv} is correct in its understanding of the meaning of \( y\check{s} \).

The fact that Moses directs the people to see this salvation suggests that God is about to do something on their behalf. It will be evident to the people that what happens is a divine act. This brings us to our lection.

Verse 10, which describes the first part of this divine act, contains numerous textual difficulties that make an exact translation and interpretation nearly impossible. Consulting a few Bibles will give a good indication of the various possibilities. One common interpretation is that the movement of the pillar of cloud functions to separate Egypt and Israel so that the two armies won’t come together. In light of the people’s sudden, overwhelming desire to return to Egypt, it is also possible that the movement of the pillar of cloud prevented the Israelites from turning around and heading back from whence they had come.

Moses then stretches out his hand over the sea as he was commanded by YHWH in 14:16. “The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided” (v. 21). Although this is a divine act, it makes use of both Moses and the east wind to create this dry ground. This act of salvation requires three agents (divine, human, and nonhuman) to accomplish its purpose.

The people went on this dry ground to the other side. Rabbinic tradition deals with the issue of who went first between those walls of
water. As is typical with biblical narrative, the text doesn’t discuss this. Nor does the text discuss any of the feelings the people may have had as they set forth across the dry ground. They just go. We might guess, though, that taking the first step was an act of faith.

The Egyptians go right after them. Then a number of things happen all at once. YHWH confuses, discomfits, and confounds the Egyptian army. In other contexts dealing with war (Exod. 23:27; Deut. 7:23; Josh. 10:10; Judg. 4:15; 1 Sam. 7:10) the word, hmmm, conveys the sense of YHWH making the enemy deathly afraid, creating a situation in which they lose all discipline and suffer an ignominious defeat. Then something happens to the wheels of the chariots (it’s not clear how the word in the Hebrew text should be interpreted). The Egyptians experience a massive equipment malfunction. God commands Moses to stretch forth his hand again over the sea, and he does. Before the Egyptians can extricate themselves from this situation which has suddenly spun out of control, the sea flows back to where it used to be and Pharaoh’s army was drowned. Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians” (v. 30).

So what is this salvation all about? It is certainly about being released from bondage, whatever form that bondage takes. But when I contemplate Israel caught between the Egyptian army and the sea, I consider that the story of exodus is also about change. Israel was changing. They were slaves; now they are free. They were in Egypt; now they’re on their way to the promised land. That change almost literally scares the hell out of them. The new situation they faced was uncertain, chaotic, and dangerous. There didn’t seem to be any certainty that they would get to where they wanted to go. It also meant giving up a world and a place they knew, a place that was secure, a place where things happened the way they always had.

That seems to be the nature of change. You have to leave where you are in order to get to another place. Over and over again in scripture we are told that the old is passing away, that God is doing a new thing. We resist every step of the way. We enter the promise kicking and screaming. To leave bondage means to step out into a world of uncertainty that is quite possibly dangerous. Why face the uncertainty, chaos, and danger when we can stay where it is safe? We find ourselves longing for “the good ol’ days.” If only we could go back to where we were everything would be okay.

In the world in which we live that is bombarded with change—changing political boundaries, changing social relationships, changing
technology—we resist. We resist even when we believe that the change is something to which God has called us. We can identify with both Pharaoh and the Israelites in this story. As Pharaoh, we do everything in our power to stop that change from happening. As Israelites, we decide the change is too scary and risky to move forward.

I have purposely left the nature of change vague. I think there are numerous options for the content of what is changing. The specifics will depend a lot on one’s context. But, at minimum, we should consider if a particular change we are resisting is something that God is in the process of creating and calling us toward. We should consider if we’re behaving like Pharaoh, the Israelites, or both.

How do we move forward? The good news is that though the Israelites wanted to go back to Egypt they never did! They crossed the sea. They entered the promised land. How did this happen? Very simply, Moses calls the people to see that the salvation YHWH will work for them this day. And YHWH does! God opens up a way for the people to move forward. This example is rather spectacular. But when they see the sea divide and dry ground appear, the Israelites went forward because that act demonstrated to them that God was with them. The God who had led them out of bondage had not deserted them (even though it may have seemed like it at the time). The One who had been with them was still with them. With that knowledge they could move forward.

This same assurance is ours. We must learn, like Israel, that to be called by God means we can’t go back, even if we want to. God is not in the habit of restoring old orders. God does new things. Yet even in the midst of uncertainty we can continue our journey knowing that God is with us. We are, after all, the people of Jesus, Immanuel, God with us, even if at times the evidence seems to say otherwise.

We know God is with us because we know our God is the one who has acted on our behalf in the past. The God who leads us is the one who has led us out of bondage. The God who can take us out of bondage can also lead us through seas. When we see what God does, we then, like Israel, can also believe.

As wonderful as this act of salvation is, it, too, has its shadow side. Israel finally believed when they saw the Egyptians dead upon the shore. As in 12:12-13, there is a sense of “eye for an eye” about the deaths of Hebrews and the deaths of Egyptians. There is a correlation between the death by drowning of the Egyptians and their intention to drown the infant sons of the Israelites.
One of my students recounted the following in a paper he wrote on the Exodus narrative. He recalled a conversation he had with an Egyptian friend. "Now what do you think about how we Egyptians feel when we read the Exodus story, about Pharaoh and the Egyptian army drowning in the Reed Sea? We read this story from the other side of the Sea. Wives lost their husbands, mothers and fathers their sons, a whole nation their leader. The Israelites were not only slaves in Egypt. They came voluntarily and survived with Egypt's help."

This once again raises for me the question that has haunted and shadowed this study: What will be the cost of our salvation?

Suggested Readings


Fine, Irene, and Bonnie Feinman, eds. Taking the Fruit: Modern Women's Tales of the Bible. San Diego: Woman's Institute for Continuing Jewish Education, 1981. This is a pamphlet of Jewish feminist midrash. I am indebted to this work for my understanding of the role of Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives.


Jewish feminist midrash on female characters in the Old Testament. Her portrayal of Pharaoh's daughter, as are all her midrashim, is theologically insightful. You will learn something new about biblical women by reading her book.

Sugirtharajah, R. S. 
*Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991; revised ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis/SPCK, 1995. Both the original and the revised editions have a section that includes interpretations on the Exodus from Korea, Africa, Asian feminist, Palestinian and Native American perspectives. It gathers in one place a kaleidoscope of interpretations on Exodus from around the world that are probably unfamiliar to most congregations.

Notes


3. The only other use of this work is in the flood story in Genesis 6-9 where Noah builds an ark. Its use here clues the reader into expecting another divine rescue from the waters of chaos.


7. See the book by Naim Ateek listed in the Suggested Readings for a clear presentation of the Palestinian understanding of the Exodus.


13. Ibid., 132.


16. Ibid., 88.
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