A Scholarly Journal for Reflection on Ministry

QUARTERLY REVIEW

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   Plus book reviews
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Scholars during Hegel’s day intentionally tried to be obscure. Apparently the more dense the language, the more sophisticated the thought was assumed to have been. We scoff at such obfuscation; and yet one American president, at least, admitted to purposeful confusion in his choice of words.

At the other extreme are those who can never be clear enough. Falling into this vice are language analysts, lawyers, and editors. These nail-filers exact impatience, too. Who then are the happy speakers and writers of English who strike that happy medium between the understandable and the overly precise?

We hope the writers in Quarterly Review qualify in this respect. They are typically scholars communicating with professionals in the ministry. These writers assume their readers have a professional education—not that this assumption frees them to be too abstract or to tangle their syntax. The goal is not only clarity but also grace and force.

Clarity isn’t the only problem. English is a dynamic language, requiring that editors and writers know how to distinguish between new terms that are inventive and helpful, and those that are unneeded and unhelpful. Recently a radio announcer reported that some people hope to use the space shuttle as a way “to bury their ashes in space.” An odd phrase. When you think about it, though, everything buried does occupy some space. Let us then unite these two so long divided, lively English and common sense.

CHARLES E. COLE
THE CARE OF THE EARTH: THE MORAL BASIS FOR LAND CONSERVATION

JOSEPH C. HOUGH, JR.

We are rapidly losing the ground on which we stand. This statement is literally true. Soil is our scarcest natural resource, and there is no solution in sight for the problems created by the rapid deterioration of existing land resources and the depletion of land reserves.

Oddly enough, most of us are aware of the fact that our rivers have become sewers and that the ocean is a huge cesspool for our industrial and domestic garbage, that our forests have been stripped for lumber and firewood, and that some half-million species are endangered. Moreover, especially those of us who live in cities are keenly aware of the deteriorating quality of air. But until recently not much was made of the steadily increasing rate at which we are losing soil, the indirect basis of human survival for all of us, and the direct basis of economic well-being for more than half the world’s population.

In the United States alone, every day twelve square miles of farmland vanishes forever. In the last ten years alone, we have lost farmland area equivalent to the combined size of Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Delaware. This story can be duplicated around the world, in some cases with even more startling dimensions of loss.

The soil we are losing is the fruition of a long-term process. Nature requires between 2,500 and 8,000 years to build a seven-to eight-inch average cover of topsoil in the United States. In many places in this country, we are losing one inch of topsoil every twelve years. At that rate, of course, in less than one century we would lose the soil that was a product of from

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twenty-five to eighty centuries of natural growth. The worldwide phenomenon of loss of soil because of various impacts upon it means that at the present time, then, the resource that is obviously most limited in supply is arable land.

Traditional economic theorists tend to downplay the seriousness of such resource depletion. In fact, most of them did not take the Club of Rome Report by Jorgen Randers and Donella Meadows with any great seriousness. For example, MIT economist Robert Solow points out that the exhaustion of essential resources need not even be a drag on economic growth if (and this is a big if) substitutability is available. By substitutability is meant the capacity to substitute labor and capital assets to develop alternatives for a given exhaustible resource. Even if substitutability is not available, Solow argues that one must reasonably assume, based on past experience, that technological innovation will provide substitutability at some point prior to the total exhaustion of necessary resources.

What happens is that the pricing mechanism slows down the rate of consumption as resources become scarcer and more expensive to discover or to mine. At some point in the process, the cost of the natural resource reaches a point where it becomes profitable for some supertechnological substitute to be developed. This is what Nordhaus and others call "backstop technologies," that is, technologies that provide substitutability for a given resource for a practically unlimited period of time. This means, according to Solow, that optimal market allocations will tend to function as regulators of the rate of depletion of exhaustible resources so that the economy is not seriously damaged. However, in contrast to Nordhaus, Solow is a bit more pessimistic because he does not believe the market always gives accurate, concrete signals to resource owners so that an acceptable pace of resource exhaustion is prompted. In his opinion, this means that something like a long-term futures market is necessary, and he does not think that anyone is prepared to say whether that sort of thing is feasible at this point.

Aside from Solow's caution, I think it is worth pointing out that at present the scarcity of land is an even more serious problem than that of ore or oil because there is on the horizon no long-term technological substitute for land as a resource. It is
true that the highly touted “Green Revolution” raised hopes that rising productivity through the transfer of technology and technological innovation could function effectively to overcome the scarcity of land; but the most recent research on the effects of technological transfer and innovation, which were seen as the keys to the extension of land use and productivity, are very discouraging. Not only are the increases in yields leveling off, there are considerable counter-intuitive effects of the use of new petrochemical fertilizers and pesticides and the damage accruing to land from widespread use of irrigation techniques required for new seed varieties. In the view of some experts, substitutes have created far more problems than they have solved.9

Since land is a rapidly depleting resource, and since it is not immediately apparent just how effective technological substitution can be developed, then what is necessary is conservation and restoration of the land. For most of us, the land is a commodity to be bought and sold. It is an economic factor in production, a depreciable capital asset. In other words, our current understanding and evaluation of land is entirely an economic one. What seems to be required is a change from this economic perspective to a broader one. At least we need an expansion of the understanding of economic value of land by the development of ecological sensitivity. This in turn might lead to a new ethos that could yield a land ethic, one that supports conservation not merely as an economic, but as a moral necessity.10 As a modest contribution to the development of that ethos, what I propose to do in this essay is to outline briefly some moral bases for conservation. The first of these will be an empirical natural law basis; the second will be a mystical basis; and then I shall conclude with a brief reference to a possible biblical base for conservation. I also suggest that there are problems with the first two that can be addressed by a biblically based land ethic, and in this sense the biblically based ethic is more adequate as a foundation for conservation ethics.

I. The Empirical Natural Law Basis for a Land Ethic

One of the earliest forces for ecological sensitivity, one that predates the science of the ecology, was George Perkins Marsh.
Marsh was a nineteenth-century American writer who was not trained specifically as a scientist. However, he was an avid reader and a keen observer of the world. Marsh strongly believed that the world was an interlocking system of mutually dependent parts, all of which played their role in the functioning of the system, and all of which were essential to the system’s survival. Marsh was appalled at the way human beings related to the natural world.

Man has too long forgotten that the earth was given to him for usufruct alone, not for consumption, still less for profligate waste. Yet, Marsh continued,

man is everywhere a disturbing agent. Wherever he plants his foot, the harmonies of nature are turned to discords. The proportions and accommodations which insured the stability of existing arrangements are overthrown. . . . Of all organic beings, man alone is to be regarded as essentially a destructive power.

Marsh was, however, aware of legitimate human claims upon nature. Unlike some contemporary ecologists, he did not elevate nature or nature’s rights to a position equal to that of human beings. As Marsh says, “A certain measure of transformation of terrestrial surface, of suppression of natural, and stimulation of artificially modified productivity becomes necessary.” Yet, Marsh goes on to point out that human beings have far exceeded the necessary alterations of nature. They have destroyed the forests, they have broken up mountain reservoirs, killed species of birds that protected crops from insects, and committed other crimes against their own interests.

Marsh’s chief concern, then, was to demonstrate that the manner in which human beings cared for the earth worked against their own interests. In so doing, he felt that human beings were endangering their chances of survival at any acceptable level of social organization. In order to enable an existence conceivably to be called human, something had to be done. He concluded, “It is, therefore, a matter of the first importance, that, in commencing the process of fitting them for
permanent civilized occupation, the transforming operations should be so conducted as not unnecessarily to derange and destroy what, in too many cases, it is beyond the power of man to rectify or restore."

Though Marsh's writings display considerable understanding of natural processes, and at points, a deep love for nature, his basic argument for a change in the way in which we care for the earth is that it would enhance the chances of human survival in the long run. Thus, even though Marsh has been called by Stewart Udall, "the beginning of land wisdom in this country," he does not go beyond the argument for ecological sensitivity based on anthropocentric interests. Essentially, most of the arguments that we hear in the public discussion are of this sort. There is some appeal to our sense that in the long run, if the human race is to survive, the manner in which we are conducting ourselves in the biosphere must be rather radically altered.

Utilizing ideas developed by H. L. A. Hart in his book The Concept of Law, I have labeled this type of argument an empirical natural law argument. Hart asserts that at its base, natural law is a teleological view, that is, it is based on the assumption that human beings have an end that they ought to pursue, a given natural end. The empirical natural law to which Hart points, however, is not based on any metaphysical assumptions about nature or human nature. Rather, it refers for its ground to the tacit assumption that the proper end of human activity is survival. Following Hume and Hobbes, rather than Locke, Hart argues that so-called right to life is based on nothing more than the observation that human beings do indeed want to survive. Moreover, Hart argues that the aim to survive is presupposed by the very discussion of society. He says, "Our concern is with social arrangements for continual existence, not with those of a suicide club."

Once survival is assumed as the natural aim in the sense that Hart has described it, then the natural law argument proceeds quite simply to the content of natural law. The question leading to the definition of content is that of the necessary minimal conditions for there to be social existence. In Hart's words, "There are certain rules of conduct which any social organiza-
On the basis of the necessity of survival, Hart then goes on to formulate the minimum content of natural law in terms of certain necessary characteristics of social life and the resulting moral rules that are entailed. Those are quite interesting, but they are not my prime concern here. What I suggest here is simply that George Perkins Marsh has clearly presented an empirical natural law argument for ecological sensitivity. As such, it forms the meta-ethical basis for a system of moral rules requiring conservation of land and other resources. Thus, rules of conservation such as “We ought to use the land in such a way as to preserve it” are entailed by the natural law of human survival. Put another way, if human beings have the “right to life,” then the minimal content of our moral obligation is bound to include rules of land conservation that have moral force. In this way the laws of conservation have not merely a politico-economic base but also a moral foundation.

If the moral foundation of conservation is grounded in empirical natural law, then it follows that there are certain rights that belong to all human beings. I have already noted that the right to survive is the fundamental right of human beings, the one right that is a presupposition of human society. I have also noted that all of us depend upon the soil for survival indirectly and that more than half the human race depends upon the soil directly for sustenance. It follows, therefore, that the right of access to land and the right to use the land are necessarily derived from the right to survival. They are natural human rights in any common-sense empirical use of that term. From quite different perspectives, both Thomas Aquinas and Herbert Spencer were of the same mind, at least on this matter. Thomas wrote that “according to the natural order, instituted by divine providence, material goods are provided for the satisfaction of human needs. Therefore the division and appropriation of property, which proceeds from human law, must not hinder the satisfaction of man’s necessity from such goods.” Herbert Spencer, the great believer in meritocracy, argues in *Social Statics* that there is no question but that the right of access to the use of the soil is the right of every person derived necessarily from the right of life. He even goes so far as to say that if there is not
enough soil for everyone, then the land should be expropriated without compensation from those who own too much. Even John Locke, who elevated the right to private property almost to a sacred position, made it quite clear that property rights were to be limited by the necessity for everyone to have access to the land. Thus, the absolute right to property was reserved only for that land on which a person could reasonably be expected to use his or her own labor. It is on similar bases that one could extend moral arguments for conservation from empirical natural law.

Since human beings have the right of access to land, we are morally bound to conserve land so that the natural right to survive is not violated. In light of the rate at which land is disappearing, we are morally bound to conserve and restore land because the survival of half the human race is threatened now. What is more, the right to survive is also the moral basis for land reform, since access to land is fundamental for human survival as well. The fundamental base of human property rights, then, rests on material necessities for survival. Property rights are derivatives of the right to survive, and necessities for survival override any and all property rights if human survival is threatened by any pattern of land distribution. It seems to follow that not only land conservation but also land reform could be clearly based on empirical natural law according to arguments like Hart’s. Therefore, land conservation and equitable land distribution become the moral obligation of any rational and morally serious human being.

As important as is the empirical natural law argument, there are two major problems with it that should be noted. In the first place, so long as the will to survive, the will to life, is assumed to be the basis of human behavior, the ethic that follows from this meta-ethical base is by definition a self-interest or egoistic ethic. At least since Hobbes, most social and political writers have assumed that human beings are self-interested, but they have deployed various devices to avoid Hobbes’ inexorable politico-moral alternatives of anarchy and tyranny. Both Hume and Adam Smith, for example, posited a natural human sympathy that enabled human beings to feel in others the desire for survival that governed their own behavior. Natural sympathy modified pure desire for survival to limit excessive brutality and
exploitation. Similarly, Hart argues that the social character of human existence necessitates the expansion of the desire to survive to include the survival of others. This leads to a kind of naturally limited altruism that acts as a modification of pure individualistic egoism.

Even with this sort of modification of Hobbesian anthropology, however, one advances only from egoism to ethnocentrism; that is, there is no clear evidence that any particular person will extend her or his boundaries of limited altruism beyond the social grouping that is the community of survival of which he or she is a part. What is lacking is any empirical base for a universalistic sweep of human sympathy. In fact, empirical observation by some sociologists leads exactly in the opposite direction toward in-group exclusivism. In light of this fact, it seems likely that such crucial questions as justice between cultures and justice between generations will remain unanswered.

As Robert Heilbroner has argued, there is really no rational basis for conserving resources so that others may survive, and to be sure, there is no biological base for such conservation. This problem becomes particularly acute when one addresses the issue of conservation for the sake of future generations, the issue that Randers and Meadows have called the ethical question of our times. John Rawls saw this problem clearly in his Theory of Justice, and he makes no attempt at a rational argument for justice for future generations. Rather, he resorts to sentiments derived from family ties as a foundation upon which he builds his argument for justice between generations. This is a curious anomaly in what purports to be a rational theory of justice. In any case, any of the various forms of corporate identification that might be proposed apparently span little more than one generation removed. Motivation for extensive conservation for the sake of persons who will be born in the distant future simply does not exist.

One might argue that these questions could be addressed more adequately by deploying the rational principle of universalizability. This principle is based essentially on the argument that if one claims certain rights for one's self as a rational being, it follows that the same rights must be accorded
to all other rational beings in circumstances that demonstrate no relevant dissimilarities—relevant dissimilarities of those different circumstances that would require different treatment. For example, one might argue that differences in age could justify different rights, but race, national origin, and other such categories are not relevant dissimilarities. This argument advanced by moralists in various forms already carries with it an implicit meta-ethical assumption. The foundation of the principle of universalizability rests on the belief that all human beings are equal, at least in the sense that they are potentially rational. Moreover, it is assumed that if one is rational, one will accord to all other rational beings the same privileges that one would claim for oneself. Such an extension surely is not self-evident, as both Hobbes and Nietzsche argued. To adopt this sort of rationally objective principle, then, requires meta-ethical commitments that are not made plain. This sort of common sense is not nearly so common as it seems in Oxford.

The second problem with the empirical natural law basis for land conservation is similar to all land ethics based purely on the instrumental value of nature for human beings. Once it is conceded that human value is the only value upon which a moral foundation of conservation exists, then, the way is opened for the careless onslaught upon nature unless it is "worth" something; that is, unless its value is value for human beings. When one attributes value to nonhuman objects purely on the basis of their relation to human beings, any sort of action can be justified, provided the consequences of that action can be construed to benefit human survival.

II. The Mystical Basis for the Care of the Earth

Lynn White's famous article has reminded us of the inherent danger of such a perspective. White argued that the focus on the passage in Genesis where Yahweh gives human beings dominion over the earth makes Christianity the prime malefactor in the development of our ecological crises. The dedivinization of nature and the elevation of the dominance of human beings over nature characteristic of Christianity led to a ruthless attitude of exploitation that will finally destroy natural
life systems. He proposes that we abandon this mainstream Christian tendency and adopt Saint Francis as the patron saint of the ecological movement. He makes this proposal because he believes that Saint Francis affirmed the equal value of all natural life. Francis's attitude, White says, is directly contrary to the exploitative attitude arising from the Christian and Jewish tradition, which pictures humanity as the unaccountable owner and ruler of nature. White, of course, overlooks the fact that nature has been ruthlessly exploited by every conceivable religio-cultural group since the earliest days of human history. His case, therefore, is beset with some historical inaccuracies. Still, White's argument has force in that it raises the possibility of the intrinsic value of nature and particularly the value of nature relative to the value of human beings. White really need not have looked quite so far into antiquity to discover a standard-bearer for the view that nature has value apart from its value for human beings. The ethical mysticism of Albert Schweitzer is based on the fundamental belief that all created beings have value in their own right; that is, they have an intrinsic value. He arrives at this position by arguing that any rational being knows that he or she has the will to live. Following David Hume, Schweitzer then states that because the human being also is possessed with the sentiment of sympathy, the knowledge of one's own will to live arouses in us compassion for others who, we know, also possess the will to live. Unlike Nietzsche, by whom he was influenced, Schweitzer did not see the will to live being transformed into the will to power. Rather the will to live has a spiritual dimension that leads to a higher life-affirmation. In other words, the spiritual aspect of the will to live leads to a drive to fulfillment or to self-perfection. George Simmel, his teacher, convinced Schweitzer that his spiritual aspect of the will to live consisted in the drive toward self-transcendence. The actual self was always striving to become what it is potentially. The drive to self-overcoming, or perfection, in turn leads one toward a mystical unity with the universal will to live, a cosmic force that is purposive and acting in all things. According to Schweitzer's view, then, the fulfillment of life consists not in self-assertion but in the drive toward union with
the all-pervasive creative will to live that enlivens living things. Thus, one does not seek fulfillment by an enlightened egoistic drive to fulfill one's potential, but in the surrender of the self in union with the universal spirit.

Since the union with spirit is the goal of life, life-affirmation comes to mean not merely the affirmation of rational and human life but the affirmation of all life, sentient and nonsentient. In this way, Schweitzer arrives at his ethics of reverence for life. Schweitzer believed that ethics deals not only with people but also with creatures. Even as we, they have the desire for well-being, the endurance of suffering, and the horror of annihilation. Those who have retained an unblunted moral sensibility find it natural enough to share concern with the fate of all living creatures. The thoughtful cannot help recognizing that kindly conduct toward non-human life is a natural requirement of ethics.

It is not possible, according to Schweitzer, to make sharp distinctions between higher and lower forms of life. Therefore, the ethics of reverence for life means that no life is to be destroyed if such destruction can be avoided. This applies not only to animal life but to plant life as well. Even plucking a flower without necessity is a sin against life.

In the view of Schweitzer, the whole springs from the unity of the one. All life is the work of the genius, if not the emanation of the one creative spirit that is the giver of all life. Therefore, the right to life cannot be attributed to human beings alone—it belongs equally to all life, and one really has no basis for the destruction of any life. With respect to my main concern here, morally one conserves land not merely because it is the basis of human survival, but because it is the cradle of all life, sentient and nonsentient. The foundation for moral obligation rests squarely on the metaphysical assumption that all life is unified into one. To destroy any part of it is to defile the mystery of the harmony and the unity of being that is the root of the creative process. One assumes this obligation as a result of religious belief in the unity of the whole and participation of all in the being of the whole. There follows a simple extension of sympathetic identification to include the whole community of life. As a
result, one is morally obligated to extend survival concern to all creatures. Since the earth is the source of life of all creatures, one is morally obligated to conserve the earth to preserve the right to life for all living beings.

Schweitzer’s critics have been quick to point out that in his attempt to overcome excessive anthropocentricism in ethics, he has thrown the question of value into total confusion. If all value is not value for human beings, but rather value for the whole or the unity of the whole, then in what way does one determine the relative value of a butterfly, say, to that of a newborn child? Or how could one even justify cutting down a tree to make way for agriculture, or for that matter even harvesting corn for food? In other words, if Schweitzer were taken literally, there could be no development of human society as we know it. Such development requires some ordering of values so that one can make the hard moral choices posed when life is in conflict with life. Schweitzer gives no explicit guidance here. At points he does indicate that human life is more important than other forms of life. He acknowledges that even he destroys bacteria to save human lives, and he apparently feels no serious guilt about his action. However, what he insists upon is that those who destroy other forms of life so that human life may continue, do so in full knowledge that that destruction is morally serious. Even though it must be done, it is done only in the knowledge that the act is full of ethical ambiguity. All killing is evil, but some of it is necessary.

To the man who is truly ethical all life is sacred including that which from the human point of view seems lower on the scale. He makes distinctions only as each case comes before him, and under the pressure of necessity, as for example, when it falls to him to decide which two lives he must sacrifice in order to preserve the other. But all through this series of decisions he is conscious of acting on subjective grounds and arbitrarily, and knows that he bears responsibility for the life which is sacrificed.

Under necessity the moral person acts on alternatives short of the ideal, knowing that in so doing she or he has fallen short of the life-affirmation that is the path to true self-affirmation.
How we are to order our choices still is not clear. There is some indication that next to aesthetic and rational beings one would place those who obviously suffer, but the concrete hierarchy is never developed. We are left with the admonition to be totally concerned with the affirmation of all life even as we are forced by the necessity of choosing less than absolute good. Thus, as Henry Clark says, reverence for life functions, not as an absolute moral rule, but as a call for a new attitude toward all life: the attitude of universal compassion.

William Blackstone has pointed out that much of this expanded sympathy, this reverence for all life, "reverberates in the writings of current ecological ethicists." This is particularly true of the writings of Joel Feinberg, Herbert Speigelberg, and Peter Singer. They, like Schweitzer, move in the direction of the radical equality of certain forms of life within human life, and they too inherit the problems of ordering moral choices in a similar fashion.

There are a number of other problems with Schweitzer's development of his ethic of reverence for life, among which are some profound theological ones. However, it is not my purpose to review Schweitzer here, and so I shall just mention one additional problem. Schweitzer's extreme individualism, which led him to maintain a radical separation between his own life and the major political issues of his time, is a reflection of an inadequacy in his whole ethical program. The beautiful mystical vision that he paints for us is one of the heart—a purely internal matter unrelated to laws. Therefore, the ethics of reverence for life is not innately related to the pressing questions of public policy. That we should love the land because it is the cradle of all life would probably be obvious to Schweitzer, but apart from teaching and serving, Schweitzer saw no public or corporate implications. He seemed to think that human beings are fully capable of knowing the good and that when they know it they will do it. He therefore views with disdain some of those who push into the political arena in an attempt to affect a range of choices before human beings. This is not to say that Schweitzer should be identified with the total preoccupation of being as opposed to doing that is characteristic of some classical mysticism. For Schweitzer, being and doing are united in the
care of life exhibited in concrete acts. But these acts spring from personal motivation alone, and in no way is the ethics of reverence for life concerned with anything more than abstract justice. The laws of justice are outside its ethical concerns.

III. The Biblical Basis for a Conservation Ethic

I have argued that while empirical natural law can provide us with a basis for a conservationist ethic that includes concrete rights and guidelines for public policy on the care of the earth, its focus is so narrowly anthropocentric that there is a motivational problem. In other words, if the only foundation for moral behavior is human necessity, it is not likely that anything short of ecological disaster will promote an ethos that would support an adequate moral basis for conservation.

The mystical basis of conservation avoids this narrow anthropocentrism and provides a motivation for conservation that does not depend solely upon the raw will for biological survival. In the case of Schweitzer's mysticism, I have argued that the ethics of reverence for life yields an attitude of universal compassion for all life. Obviously, this is a conservationist stance. Wanton destruction of the bases for life, even the soil, would be morally prohibited under this view because it would be indirect destruction of life. Schweitzer even intimates at points that nonliving matter should be held in reverence as well. Moreover, even though Schweitzer never specifically addresses the question of justice to the unborn, his ethical proposals foreshadow an ethos in which nothing is wasted and self-indulgence is unknown. This being the case, the effectiveness of the ethics of reverence for life would ensure the maximal provision for future generations as well. Thus, the mystical basis for an ethic of conservation provides a motivational force for a conservation ethic; but as I have noted, it has not provided a basis for the ordering of concrete moral choices. Therefore, in conclusion, I wish to suggest a biblical base for a conservation ethic that I believe provides both a motivation for conservation and a ground for specific concrete rights.

The biblical foundation for an ethic of conservation must be derived both from creation and covenant because the covenant
is for the sake of implementing God's justice in creation. Thus we begin with the creation and establish this as the basis for an understanding of covenantal provisions.  

The great Creation myth set in bold relief the relationship of God to all creatures. There it became clear that though God had given humankind dominion over the earth, that dominion was clearly limited. As Thomas Paine once said, "Man did not make the earth, and though he had a natural right to occupy it, he had no right to locate as his property in perpetuity any part of it; neither did the creator of the earth open a land office from which the first title deed should issue." While it is true that the Creation was fully complete and good only when Adam and Eve were placed in the garden to live in abundance from the garden, there were limits to their use of it that clearly specified God's claim on it as well. The specific character of the limits does not interest me here, but the fact that there were limits is a clear indication that the gift was conditional. Moreover, the violations of these claims of God on the garden resulted in a radical alteration of the human situation. The divine harmony of God, human beings, and the garden was disrupted, and human beings were expelled—alienated from the garden—by an act of God's judgment. If the prohibitions on the use of the garden are understood as proceeding from the continuing claims of God upon the garden, then the rights of humanity to use the garden are limited by God's rights of ownership. These claims are absolute and are experienced by human beings in the garden as limits on their behavior toward the inhabitants of the garden. They could not eat of the fruit of the tree. Operationally, then, God's claims on the garden function as rights of the tree not to have its fruit eaten. In this way one can understand rights of nature over against humanity. If one understands the conditions of the garden in this way, it is quite possible to develop the obligation for care of the earth as a cardinal tenet of biblical faith. To respect the "rights of nature" is nothing less than to honor the claims of God upon God's own creation. To do less would be to engage in an act of willful defiance of the divine sovereignty.

A second insight that appears in the myth of the garden is that creation is an act of grace; that is, the presentation of a fitting environment for humanity is not an event instituted by contract.
It is a gift. As such, it is to be used, to be sure—God is not one who gives halfheartedly. In Jesus Christ we know God as the one who gives unreservedly and fully to humanity. However, this gift is to humanity for the world. This means, as is so often stated in the Bible, that God's gift is one that is to be used for the benefit of the whole world. The people of God are the ones through whom all nations will be blessed (Gen. 12:3). They are the ones on whom the whole creation waits in eager longing. (Rom. 8:19-23). The longing of creation for their coming is thus grounded in natural teleology. Those who know that the world is a gift and know that the gift is for the whole are the ones who genuinely understand the purpose of creation and who are commissioned to work with God for its total redemption. Thus it is a requirement of our faith that we work for the achievement of harmonious relationships with the whole world. To do otherwise, to destroy and exploit wantonly, would be to work against God's redemptive purpose. Therefore, in the myths of creation it is clear that God values humanity more than the act of creation. It is also clear that the garden is for human beings, to provide them a living space of abundance and beauty. But God's claims on the garden mean that the human occupants there are confronted with an obligation to be responsible to God for the garden.

If one focuses the interest in God's redemptive purpose on the land itself, there are a number of very important points that can be suggested. In the first place, the seal of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel was a gift of the land. Moreover, that gift was also a gift of grace. Israel had no claim whatsoever to the title of the land, nor did any specific tribe or person have a right to stake out possession of specific plots. The land was apportioned by religious ritual, namely, the casting of lots by the priests. In this way, it was clear that even the right to use specific plots of land was determined by the divine decree. Human ownership of the land is therefore derivative.

Furthermore, there was a specific prohibition against selling the land, based on the ownership of the land of Yahweh. "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me" (Lev. 25:23). God clearly retains ownership to the land in perpetuity, and the manner in
which Israel uses the land is subject to the divine claim. Moreover, Walter Bruggemann, in his book *The Land*, has shown that the productivity of the land was seen to be closely related to Yahweh's judgment on Israel's faithfulness to the covenant. If the land flowered and was productive, that was seen a sign of faithfulness. If not, it was a sign of unfaithfulness. Therefore, not only is Yahweh's claim to the land a limitation on land ownership, the terms of the covenant are indirectly a requirement for good husbandry and care of the land. The moral obligation to practice land conservation, then, is theologically grounded not only in creation but in covenant.

Further elaboration of the biblical basis for a conservation ethic can be derived from the Year of Jubilee provisions. The productivity of the earth was protected by the requirement that the land be rested, and God's claim to the land was re-established in the provision that those who had lost land during the previous forty-nine-year period must have their land restored to them. Even those in bondage were to be freed and given land debt-free. Furthermore, the rights of land use were limited by the requirement that fruit produced on the land was to be left to the birds and the beasts. In this way, once again, God's claims on the land, here grounded in covenantal legislation, indirectly functioned as rights of nonhuman nature over against humans. The animals had a right to use the land in fallow because God claimed the usufruct for them in the Jubilee Year. It is important to keep firmly in mind the fact that the rights of nature are not absolute or in any way on an equal basis with humanity. The covenant is with human beings in and for the world. But God's claims on the world mean that the covenant with humanity is a covenant not merely for humanity but for the world as well. Therefore, both from the standpoint of creation and covenant, there are clear bases for a conservation ethic. On the one hand, "the earth is the Lord's" and not ours. As tenants on the divine holding, we conserve that which is God's as an act of obedience to the covenant and as recognition of nature's own integrity as the artifact of divine creation. We respect the "rights of nature," not as a condition of human survival, but as a recognition of the divine claim upon the world and upon us. Furthermore, the
teleological aspect of God’s redemptive claim reaches out to future generations as well. We respect the rights of future generations because God’s covenant with us is also with them, and God’s claim upon the world is a claim upon the world for their redemption as much as it is for our own. We can thus avoid the narrow anthropocentrism of the natural-law view.

Furthermore, this is not merely a matter of attitude or inward disposition. The divine claims form a theological foundation for specific rights and obligations that will ensure the integrity of nature and the fulfillment of our covenant to participate with God in God’s redemptive purpose for the world now and in the future. This in turn enables us to affirm the supreme importance of human value without losing sight of the fact that the value of nature is not simply for us but also for God. On these bases, we can construct an ethic of genuine and careful stewardship of the world’s resources while avoiding the confusing sentimentality of the mystical view.

It is not possible here to spell out the practical implications of a biblically based conservation ethic. Suffice it to say that it seems to render absolute private rights to land problematical and would clearly view misuse of land not only as a moral wrong, but theologically would consider the failure to conserve the land a misuse of God’s gift: a sin not only against humans and animals but against God.

NOTES

11. Ibid., p. 36, 39.
12. Ibid., p. 35.
13. Ibid., p. 35.
16. Ibid., p. 188.
17. Ibid., p. 189.
18. Ibid., pp. 190-92.
23. Mustader Sherif and Carolyn Sherif, Groups in Harmony and Tension (New York: Harper, 1953). This is a classic in the literature, and here the Sherifs demonstrate that simple identification of boys in camp with group nicknames led to rapid in-group identification and subsequently a high level of conflict.
32. Ibid., p. 22 ff.
34. Ibid., p. 16.
41. Ibid., pp. 99-100.
42. I owe this insight to an unpublished paper by Rolf Knierim, "God and World in Israel's Experience." Here Knierim argues that the Creator-Sustainer God who relates to humanity and the whole universe is neglected in the studies of Old Testament theology in favor of the particularistic Yahweh of the convenantal literature. Arguing that the idea of a universal creator God is thoroughly biblical, Knierim goes on to show that in the Psalms and in select passages from the prophets, the universalistic God is given hermeneutical priority over the particularistic covenant God. (This theme is further developed in Knierim's unpublished paper, "The Biblical Concept of Justice").
44. I originally suggested these ideas in a sermon entitled "Land and People," preached in a chapel service at the School of Theology at Claremont in the fall of 1978.
46. If space permitted, this could be developed further. Evidence could be adduced for the position from the Psalms. Cf. note 42 above.
Strange though it may seem, the first Methodist leaders in America greatly influenced both the introduction of slavery into the only American colony in which it had been prohibited and the abolition of slavery in the Anglo-American culture. John Wesley, who came to Savannah in 1735, two years after its settlement, endorsed with conviction the ban on slavery that the idealistic trustees of Georgia had imposed. His experiences with slavery while in the colonies prompted him to study about black Africa and the slave trade on returning to England and to fight vigorously during the next half-century for the abolition of slavery in areas of British rule. But George Whitefield, more than any other one person, convinced the trustees of Georgia in 1750 that they should permit the slave practices of a neighboring colony.1 South Carolinians were profiting from their investment in slaves, who then vastly outnumbered the white settlers.

Wesley and James Oglethorpe were both attracted to Georgia because it was founded “to relieve the distressed,” and because they presumed that slavery was “a horrid crime” that would not be allowed in a colony devoted to Christian principles.2 During his years in America, Wesley was able to observe slavery in operation only when he visited South Carolina. At Charleston he encountered some blacks who attended a service where he was preaching. After conversing with one of them, he entered in his journal a prayer for deliverance for these “outcasts.” On a later trip to South Carolina, Wesley was impressed by a young slave whom he found “very desirous and very capable of instruction.”3

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1 William E. Phipps is professor of religion and philosophy at Davis and Elkins College, Elkins, West Virginia.
After Wesley returned to England in 1737, Whitefield became his Methodist replacement. He soon started an orphanage at a plantation named Bethesda, hoping that it would become self-sustaining. But Georgia plantations, he came to realize, lacked the potential for quick investment return that those in slaveholding areas had. Thus Whitefield took money that had been collected in South Carolina and purchased there a plantation and some slaves. Finding that plantation “blessed by God,” he wrote the trustees of Georgia in 1748 to urge that they permit Georgia planters to replace the unsuccessful white labor with slave labor.

Shortly after receiving Whitefield’s request, the trustees capitulated. In 1751 Whitefield wrote happily: “Thanks be to God, that the time for favoring the colony of Georgia seems to be come. Now is the season for us to exert our utmost for the good of the poor Ethiopians.” In this letter Whitefield goes on to offer a biblical, humanitarian, and economic rationale for slavery:

As for the lawfulness of keeping slaves, I have no doubt, since I hear of some that were bought with Abraham’s money, and some that were born in his house. . . . Hot countries cannot be cultivated without Negroes. What a flourishing country might Georgia have been, had the use of them been permitted years ago! How many white people have been destroyed for want of them, and how many thousands of pounds spent to no purpose at all? Though it is true that they are brought in a wrong way from their own country, and it is a trade not to be approved of, yet as it will be carried on whether we will or not, I should think myself highly favoured if I could purchase a good number of them, in order to make their lives comfortable, and lay a foundation for breeding up their posterity in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

When Whitefield died in 1790 he had fifty Georgia slaves, who were listed in his will as property to be bequeathed.

Whitefield’s sentiments had shifted sharply during his first decade in America. In an open letter to slaveholders of the Southern colonies, which was printed in 1740, he noted that horses and dogs were generally given better care on plantations than slaves. He warned the taskmasters who “ploughed furrows into the backs” of their slaves that the blood they had
spilt would ascend to heaven against them. James 5:1, 4 is aptly quoted by Whitefield to give authority to his belief that God will punish those who deny economic justice to those who labor for them.⁸

The differing attitudes toward slaves held by Wesley and Whitefield are reflected in their main theological disagreement. Wesley had diverged from Whitefield’s Calvinism by affirming that universal redemption was God’s desire.⁹ He was not convinced that non-Christians, whether they lived in Africa or elsewhere, were eternally damned. In a letter to Wesley written from Bethesda, Whitefield harshly rebuked Wesley for his belief that God might accept the unconverted in their natural state.¹⁰

In 1772 Wesley read a book that renewed his admiration for the black African and his hatred of slavery. Anthony Benezet, a Huguenot refugee who had joined the Society of Friends, published in Philadelphia A Caution and Warning to Great Britain and her Colonies in 1766 and Some Historical Account of Guinea in 1771. These books were based on accounts by men from France and England who had made voyages to West Africa and to the West Indies on slave ships. Regarding one of these books Wesley commented: “I read a very different book, published by an honest Quaker, on that execrable sum of all villanies, commonly called the slave trade. I read of nothing like it in the heathen world, whether ancient or modern; and it infinitely exceeds, in every instance of barbarity, whatever Christian slaves suffer in Mahometan countries.”¹¹ Wesley then studied Benezet’s other book about slavery and decided to publicize in England a digest of the contents of these two books along with his own viewpoint on slavery. Evidently Wesley realized that Scripture was effectively being quoted by defenders of slavery, for he avoided Benezet’s questionable attempt to prove that the Bible has an antislavery stance. Rather, Wesley appealed to transethnic natural rights that he, like a number of eighteenth-century philosophers, presumed would be commonly accepted by his readers. Unlike slaveholder Thomas Jefferson, who would soon draft the Declaration of Independence, Wesley believed that the inalienable right of liberty was bestowed by the Creator on blacks as well as whites.

Wesley published his essay entitled Thoughts Upon Slavery in
1774. His paraphrase and abridgement of Benezet's writings plus his own reflections combine to give information about and evaluation of Africans that is remarkably similar to what Alex Haley has recorded in his epoch-making *Roots*. In Wesley's carefully researched essay, Whitefield's humanitarian, economic, and theological defenses of slavery are demolished. Although Wesley does not base his position on religious authority, he does, in conclusion, allude to one verse from the Old Testament, "The blood of thy brother crieth against thee" (Gen. 4:10), and to one from the New, "Thou who hath mingled of one blood all the nations upon earth" (Acts 17:26). Wesley draws on his own experience to reject Whitefield's contention that whites are unable to labor in hot climates. He testifies that in the summer heat of Georgia he used his spare time "in felling of trees and clearing of ground, as hard labor as any Negro need be employed in." Far from impairing health, those who engaged in such labor were healthier than those who remained idle.

In attacking the slave institution, Wesley ranged far beyond the immediate circumstances in the American colonies. He went to the root of the matter by describing the land and the peoples of the west and central African coasts. "The land is well cultivated... producing abundance of rice and roots... Fish is in great plenty; the flocks and herds are numerous, and the trees loaded with fruit."

Although an evangelist, Wesley writes charitably of the African religions and does not insist that it is the Christian's duty to convert Africans. He is especially attracted to the Mandingo Moslems, who pray frequently and who have sanctions against the use of alcohol. He points out that the non-Moslems in Africa also worship one God and have an excellent system of justice. In summary he states:

The Negroes who inhabit the coast of Africa, from the river Senegal to the southern bounds of Angola, are so far from being the stupid, senseless, brutish, lazy barbarians, the fierce, cruel, perfidious savages they have been described, that, on the contrary, they are represented, by them who have no motive to flatter them, as remarkably sensible, considering the few advantages they have for improving their understanding; as industrious to the highest
degree, perhaps more so than any other natives of so warm a climate;
as fair, just, and honest in all their dealings, unless where white men
have taught them to be otherwise; and as far more mild, friendly,
and kind to strangers, than any of our forefathers were. It is Wesley’s judgment that the real barbarians are the
slave-traders who prevail upon the noble Africans to make war
upon one another and to sell their prisoners. He reports that one
such war in 1724 resulted in the death of forty-five hundred
warriors. But the deaths from capture are small compared to the
deaths from sea travel. Wesley informs his readers that about
one hundred thousand slaves per year are taken on board to be
delivered to American colonies, but during the passage “30,000
die; that is, properly, are murdered.” After describing the
incredible shipboard conditions Wesley comments: “it is no
wonder so many should die in the passage, but rather, that any
survive it.”
Wesley then describes what happens to the slaves that reach
America. Families are torn apart at the slave markets, and “they
are reduced to a state scarce any way preferable to that of beasts
of burden.” “They are attended by overseers, who, if they think
them dilatory, or think any thing not so well done as it should
be, whip them most unmercifully, so that you may see their
bodies long after wealed and scarred.” In response to the
prejudice that blacks are dumb animals, Wesley charges that this
presumption is due to “inhuman masters who give them no
means, no opportunity, of improving their understanding.”
Wesley asks: “Did the Creator intend that the noblest creatures
in the visible world should live such a life as this?”
Thoughts Upon Slavery concludes with this ringing appeal: “Do
not hire another to shed blood; do not pay him for doing it!
Whether you are a Christian or no, show yourself a man! . . .
Liberty is the right of every human creature, as soon as he
breathes the vital air; and no human law can deprive him of that
right which he derives from the law of nature.”
In the same year that Wesley published his slavery essay he
wrote in the Monthly Review about the inhumanity of slavery in
the English colonies. For that journal he quoted from
advertisements for runaway slaves that had been published in American newspapers. One offered a handsome reward for returning a fugitive’s “head severed from the body” and a much lesser reward for bringing the slave back alive to his owner.  

Benezet was delighted that his friend Wesley had incorporated into his eloquent abolition pleas information that Benezet had collected about the plight of the Africans and republished in Philadelphia Thoughts Upon Slavery the same year that it was published in London. After 1775 Wesley’s influence among those who would lead the new American government was diminished by his advocacy of the Tory cause in his Calm Address to Our American Colonies. Thus, in 1778 when Benezet published Serious Considerations, in which Wesley’s own ideas in Thoughts Upon Slavery are quoted extensively, he did not mention Wesley by name. However, Benezet acknowledged that he was adding his ideas to those of “a sensible author.”

In his 1778 Serious Address to the People of England Wesley reiterates his righteous indignation: “I would to God . . . we may never more steal and sell our brethren like beasts; never murder them by thousands and tens of thousands! O may this worse than Mahometan, worse than pagan abomination be removed from us forever! Never was anything such a reproach to England since it was a nation, as the having any hand in this execrable traffic.”

A decade after Wesley put down his criticisms of slavery, the Society for Suppression of the Slave Trade was formed. To assist that lobby Wesley distributed widely copies of his anti-slavery essay. In 1787 he wrote to Thomas Funnell: “I have printed a large edition of the Thoughts on Slavery and dispersed them to every part of England. But there will be vehement opposition made, both by slave-merchants and slave-holders; and they are mighty men. But our comfort is, He that dwelleth on high is mightier.”

The last book that octogenarian Wesley read was The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olandah Equiano. The testimony of that West Indian black stimulated him to write William Wilberforce on February 24, 1791, what was to be, appropriately, his final letter.
Go on, in the name of God and the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it. Reading this morning a tract written by a poor African, I was particularly struck by that circumstance, that a man who has a black skin, being wronged or outraged by a white man, can have no redress; it being a law in our Colonies that the oath of a black against a white, goes for nothing. What villainy is this!17

Wilberforce picked up the prophetic mantle and carried Wesley’s abolitionist crusade to a triumph in nineteenth-century England. That evangelical member of Parliament lacked Wesley’s ability for original thought, but he operated skillfully in the political arena. Owing in large part to his leadership, the bill abolishing slave trade was passed in 1807, and the emancipation bill was passed in 1833, the year of Wilberforce’s death.

The first two American Methodist bishops, Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, were outspoken opponents of slavery in the United States, although the expression of such views was especially difficult because most Methodists lived in slaveholding areas. A pronouncement of American Methodism in the year the church was established expressed unequivocally Wesley’s position on slavery: “We view it as contrary to the Golden Law of God . . . and the unalienable Rights of Mankind.”19 Novelist Alex Haley accurately reconstructed the early social history of his own denomination when he put these words into the mouth of an eighteenth-century slave: “Methodists called a great big meetin’ in Baltimore an’ finally dey ‘greed slavin’ was ‘gainst Gawd’s laws an’ dat anybody callin’ hiself Christian wouldn’t have it did to deyselves, so it’s mostly de Methodists an’ Quakers makin’ church fuss to git laws to free niggers.”20

More than a century ago a biographer of Wesley wrote: “The day has yet to come when the influence of his advanced views [on blacks] will be duly and gratefully recognised.”21 It is appalling to realize that the day has still not arrived when Wesley’s contribution to racial equality is broadly recognized, although a few scholars are aware of his stand. David Davis, in his excellent study of slavery in Western culture, has accorded Wesley the significance he deserves,22 and Wesley’s Thoughts
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Upon Slavery has evoked this tribute from Wesley Bready: "Perhaps the most far-reaching treatise ever written against slavery." Likewise, Wellman Warner has stated that that essay "was one of the most effective pieces of anti-slavery literature produced, and it was given the widest circulation for many years." But few white Britshers or Americans living now have as much accurate knowledge of African roots as Wesley had two centuries ago. Moreover, those publications in which the results of scholarship are widely disseminated, such as the Encyclopaedia Britannica, usually fail to mention Wesley's role as an abolitionist.

Of special importance is the recognition of Wesley's contribution to social change in a world pervaded with the theory of Marxist economic determinism. At a time when the development of slavery was greatly to England's economic advantage, Wesley and his followers were motivated by religious ideology to change the system, and their efforts were to have significant social effects. Religion was for Wesley, not an opiate making him insensitive to inhumane acts of his English compatriots, but a dynamite for shattering institutions that violate the principle that "liberty is the right of every human creature."

NOTES

5. Ibid., p. 200.
6. Ibid., p. 404.
7. Ibid., III, 406.
12. This and the following quotations from Thoughts Upon Slavery refer to John Wesley, Works (London, 1872), XI, 59-79.
16. Letters, VIII, 23.
17. Ibid., p. 265.
HOMILETICAL RESOURCES:
EXEGESIS OF OLD TESTAMENT
LECTIONARY TEXTS FOR THE SEASON
AFTER PENTECOST

LLOYD R. BAILEY

Aids to guide the interpreter who would transport the meaning of the biblical text from the ancient Near East to the modern Near West are neither numerous nor comprehensive in scope. On the one hand, commentaries by biblical scholars often focus upon one extreme of the journey to the neglect of the other. The author’s expertise may be primarily in the area of textual, literary, and historical problems, and thus a minimum of attention may be given to the more comprehensive question of what it “meant” to those who first heard the text proclaimed. The further question of what it “means” is usually left to those with competence in theology or homiletics. On the other hand, homileticians very often write brief “sermon starters” in denominational publications or publish collections of their sermons without including reflection upon how they have trodden the treacherous path from “then” to “now.” Indeed, preachers often resist producing a list of suggestions to guide this crucial transition, saying that one must instead be intuitive, imaginative, and willing to be guided by the freedom of the Holy Spirit. And when the “hermeneutic problem” is discussed by scholars, it is often done in such compact philosophical language that the average interpreter of Scripture finds it difficult to understand.

My goal in presenting the following studies is at least twofold: (1) to clarify the texts for those who would use them for dialogue with the “believing communities” (church and synagogue) in the present, and (2) to illustrate an approach whereby such texts may be studied and to encourage the readers to be more reflective about the ways they interpret Scripture.

Prior to making my own suggestions about how a particular text may address the community in the present, I have reflected upon the suggestions that others have made concerning them, especially when the approach taken was problematic in view of my assumptions (previously outlined) about how the Bible may be used in the present. These "negative" examples I have taken mostly from The Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952; 12 volumes) and from Proclamation: Aids for Interpreting the Lessons of the Church Year (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974-75; 26 volumes). These sources were chosen, not because they are more problematic than other homiletical resources (quite the contrary!), but because they are well known and widely used.

Very often I speak of how the text may address the synagogue as well as the church. I do this, not because I presume it my task as an ordained United Methodist clergyman to address the synagogue (although I did spend five years of graduate study at the feet of rabbis at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion), but because the church shares the Hebrew Bible with that branch of the "believing community" and because there are problems of interpretation that are common to both. There is no intrinsic reason why Christian clergy and rabbis should disagree about what a given text originally meant, or even about what it may mean in the present. Each may, of course, trace a given theme beyond the Hebrew Bible to its possible reinterpretation, modification, supplementation, or rejection in the New Testament and rabbinic literature, respectively.

NOTES

1. Some regional editions of the United Methodist Church's newspapers carry a half-column "Sixty-Second Sermon," for example.
4. A comprehensive review of the discussion may be found in Anthony C. Thiselton, The Two Horizons (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).
5. One might assume, from books that have been published, that the primary problem in interpreting the Bible within the church is: What are we to do with the Old Testament? See, e.g., Bernhard W. Anderson, ed., The Old Testament and Christian Faith (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969); Lawrence Toombs, "The Problematic of Preaching from the Old Testament," Interpretation, 23 (1969), 302-14. A more basic problem, it seems to me, is: What are we to do with the Bible, or any part thereof? James Barr is surely right when he remarks, "There is no quite special problem of the Old Testament" (Old and New in Interpretation [New York: Harper and Row, 1966]).

6. Barr (ibid., p. 154) points out, correctly in my opinion, that there is no intrinsic reason that a sermon from an Old Testament text preached in the synagogue should differ from one preached in the church. This is not to state that they can, or should, always be identical.

**SUNDAY, JULY 5**

*Lections*¹


Exegesis and Exposition of Zechariah 9:9-13

That Zechariah is among the most difficult books to interpret has been commented upon at least since the time of Saint Jerome (fourth century A.D.). A number of factors have combined to create the difficulty. (1) Three once-independent collections of prophetic material have been joined together within its bounds: chapters 1–8 (note the prose in RSV), 9–11 (poetry), and 12–14 (prose). (2) The material contains archaizing features that make it difficult to date. For example, it refers to exiles in Egypt and Assyria (10:10), which sounds like Israel's situation in the eighth century B.C. In actuality, however, it may refer to the Seleucid (Syrian) and Ptolemaic (Egyptian) states in the fourth century. (3) Its historical references are so vague that more than one actual situation could be referred to, as the previous illustration makes clear. (4) The text has occasionally become corrupt in transmission or is grammatically obscure. As an illustration of the former, note that, whereas the Hebrew Bible has "I" (namely, God) as the subject in 9:10, the Septuagint (the earliest Greek version) has "he" (namely, the coming king). As an illustration of the latter problem, there is the word 'am in 9:9. Does it mean "humble" (RSV), or is it a synonym for "triumphant" in the previous line? The nature of the coming king hangs in the balance!

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¹ For the full text of the lections, see the full edition of the Quarterly Review.
Such difficulties are especially evident in chapters 9-14, which contain our passage. It will be precarious, therefore, to be dogmatic about interpretation and to tie the passage too closely to any one historical context.

1. Background Information: What the Text Said to Its Original Situation

A. The literary context for interpretation

1. Chapters 1–8 ("First Zechariah"). When the exiles returned from Babylon (following Cyrus' edict in 539 B.C.), they found that reality did not accord with the high expectations that had been so lyrically expressed in Isaiah 40-55. The disappointment is evident in Isaiah 55-66, in Haggai, and in these initial chapters of Zechariah. Despite the difficulties, however, the prophet does not lose hope: he looks forward to the completion of the temple and to the inward renewal of the people, and he holds up a vision of a time of security and prosperity. This message begins around 519 B.C. (1:1).

2. Chapters 9–14 ("Second Zechariah"). Although modern scholars have dated this material anywhere from 722 to 160 B.C., the consensus is that it is later than chapters 1–8 and that chapter 9 reflects the situation in the late fourth century B.C., when Alexander the Great has conquered the entire Near East. Note the reference to Greece as the political power in the area (9:13).

3. Which verses belong together as thought-units? The lectionaries are divided on the boundaries of our unit. Is it 9:9-13 (COCU; Seasons of the Gospel), or is it 9:9-10 (Episcopal, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran lectionaries)? The former unit seems indicated by the textual arrangement in RSV and NEB, the latter by NAB. The issue at stake here is more than an academic one. The longer reading sets the anticipation of the coming king in the context of God's actions with respect to Judah and its neighbors. God is thus the major actor; the deity's faithful activity in behalf of the people is the theme. But the shorter reading strips the king of a theological and historical context and focuses instead upon his nature. The coming one thus becomes the hero of the story. (This may account for the change of pronoun from "I" (God) to "he" (the king) in the Greek version
as mentioned above.) The text is thus dehistoricized, and it becomes much easier for the modern Christian reader to ignore Zechariah's word to his own time and to move directly to an understanding of Jesus in the light of this text.

Verses 1-8 are directed against cities in Syro-Palestine and refer to God in the third person ("he": vv. 1-4; note the space in RSV thereafter) and in the first person ("I": vv. 5-8). We seem to reach a conclusion at v. 8, where the Lord dwells in the midst of the people.

Verses 9-10 are addressed directly to Zion-Jerusalem, using the second person ("you"), and the deity speaks in the first person ("I"). We seem to reach a conclusion in v. 10, where peace and dominion extend from sea to sea.

Verses 11 ff. depict the deity ("I") as addressing someone (feminine singular: Hebrew נָשִׁית, "you"). Presumably it is the people of Judah personified as a maiden. Note that Judah as a whole is addressed (v. 13), and not the Zion-Jerusalem nucleus of verses 9-10. This thought-unit extends through v. 15 and has a militaristic tone, whereas verses 16-17, a fitting conclusion to the series of portraits, speaks of a time of security and prosperity. Hence JB places vv. 11-17 together, but RSV has 11-15 separated from 16-17.

Most interpreters, therefore, propose three (if not four) thought-units in chapter 9. How they are related to each other we will discuss below.

B. What situation was addressed by the text? The reader must bear in mind that this is a difficult, much-discussed problem, and that tentativeness on the part of the interpreter is in order.

Verses 1-8 seem to anticipate Alexander's conquest of the surrounding city-states and to identify it with the judgment of God. The date would thus be approximately 333 B.C. The prophet assumes that this event will usher in an age of independence and security for the Judean people.

Verses 11-15 (11-17?) express dissatisfaction with Greek domination and suggest that God will defeat the Greeks through the intermediacy of the Judeo-Ephraimite army. Therefore, some time seems to have elapsed between this oracle and that of verses 1-8. The tension between the two factions was most
intense during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (173–164 B.C.) and gave rise to the book of Daniel.

Verses 9-10 contain no specific reference to historic events. But those who preserved Zechariah’s oracles have placed it here, amidst materials referring to Judah’s fate and hopes at the time of Greek political domination (333–165 B.C.). The original situation to which it applied is beyond our ability to recover. That it has been editorially placed here reflects a belief that it can apply to a later or to a more general situation.

That we cannot determine the specific historical context for verses 9-10 need not lead us to abandon a search for its “meaning,” however. To that we will turn in “Assumptions of the Interpreter.”

C. Comment on details in the text

Verse 9c: “humble.” At first glance, this might seem to be an appropriate designation for someone who rides a lowly (?) ass, in contrast to a horse. Yet such a description does not accord entirely with the context. The king is also said to be “triumphant and victorious” (RSV), and these are military terms in keeping with ridding the nation of weapons of war and with “commanding” and exercising “domination.” Furthermore, the ass is not such a lowly, unpretentious animal, as we shall see. Hence a few scholars have translated the term (‘ānîn) as “triumphant,” a fitting parallel to the previous line. Usually it is translated “poor.”

Verse 9c: “ass.” Throughout the Near East the ass was regarded as a royal animal (Judg. 5:10; 10:4; I Kings 1:38; Gen. 49:10-11), especially in contrast to barbarians (nomads) who rode horses. Hence the action would be an overt claim to power, not a sign of humility. It signifies office, not demeanor.

Verse 10a: “I.” God is the speaker and actor. Emphasis is upon the divine saving activity, not upon the activity of the coming king, and least of all upon his attitude.

Verse 10b: “peace to the nations.” This hope, echoed in other prophetic oracles (Isa. 9:7; 11:6-9; Mic. 4:1-4), is essentially a return to the ideal of creation. The end duplicates the beginning.

Verse 10c: “sea to sea.” From the Mediterranean to the Gulf of Aqabah?

Verse 10c: “River.” Possibly the Euphrates, as in Isa. 7:20?
Apparently the boundaries of the Davidic-Solomonic state are being referred to, rather than worldwide domination in the modern sense of the term.

D. What word is announced to the situation? Presumably, the question in the mind of the initial audience was: "What hope have we for the future? God, we have always assumed, would keep his promises to us: promises at the time of Abraham (Gen. 12), at the time of Moses (Exod. 19–20), and at the time of David (II Sam. 7). Moreover, we have recently been reassured, through the word of a prophet, that those promises still hold (Zech. 9:1–8). Yet there has been abundant evidence to undermine our faith: the Exile (587–539), then domination by the Persians (539–333), and now the Greeks, with attendant internal strife. How long can we be expected to believe, and thus give any coherence to the community?"

In the face of these apparent repeated negations of the community's independence and self-understanding, the prophet continues to proclaim the validity of the ancient expectations. There will yet be a time of peace and security, not merely for Israel and Judah, but for their neighbors as well. And the earthly instrument for that heavenly plan will be a member of the royal house: triumphant, banishing weapons, commanding peace. It is a different future from the one that common sense and present data might dictate, but it is not a subjective innovation. It arises out of the ancient stories that the people have confessed as their own and that have given them life in the past.

II. Bridging the Gap between Then and Now: Assumptions of the Interpreter

The nature of the transition from what the text originally "said" to what it may "say" to readers in the present depends, in large measure, upon the assumptions of the interpreter. Every movement of the text from "then" to "now" must pass through the human mind, which will decide not only what was "said" but whether and how it applies to the hearer. And that mind, with its accumulation of prior knowledge, needs (emotional, social, economic, political), and assumptions about how the
world (biblical and modern) operates, serves as a set of “glasses” through which the text is filtered. That we inevitably have such “glasses” is both a blessing and a curse. They enable us to see the text (share in its world), but they also distort what we see (we read our values and needs into it).

We may guard against the negative side of this reality in at least the following ways: (1) By being aware of its existence. We cannot hear the text as the original audience did, given the vast linguistic and cultural gap that separates us from the time of the Bible. At most, we can recover only a fraction of what a contemporary would have heard. Thus the text cannot merely be read and its intended meaning automatically become clear. Thus our mind must, and will, supply “meaning,” and we need to be aware of our fallibility as it does so. (2) By trying to outline our assumptions as we interpret Scripture. They are there by the dozens every time we read the text, but most of them are so unconscious that we cannot recall them at first effort. Indeed, most persons (including preachers) when they are asked to do so seem not to understand the question! (3) By trying to be consistent in the way that we interpret texts. A rule of interpretation used in one text cannot be violated when we turn to another, unless the differing natures of the texts themselves demand it. (4) By discussing interpretation in community, so that the aberrant subjectivity of the individual is called into question by the accumulated wisdom of the group.

As illustrations of the assumptions that I bring to the text (“glasses” through which I read it), and in obedience to my call for outlining one’s assumptions, I list here, however briefly and shortsightedly, the following:

A. The text is not merely an archaic report of what individuals or a group (Israel) did, at least for those who would accept it as “scripture.” If it were, it could have little, if any, relevance for us, and in any case it would most likely not have been preserved and handed down in the way that it was. It was seen as having a significance that transcended its original situation. Thus not only would Zech. 9:9-10 have been intended for a specific circumstance that is now beyond our recovery, but it has apparently been reapplied as a general word of encouragement during the age of Greek domination. Because of its very
vagueness, it could hold up a vision of a better age that had the continuing potential of arriving. And thus I have a warrant, in the text itself and in the very purpose for which the wider collection of Scripture was preserved, for seeing significance for our own time in this text.

B. The Bible is the property of the "believing communities," i.e., of the synagogue and church as the heirs of the ancient Israel to whom it was originally addressed. As such, it must be interpreted by those communities, and not by individuals within or by outsiders. It was not intended to answer the questions of outsiders (such as, How can I know that there is a God? since the communities already assume the deity's existence), nor was it intended to describe human existence (but rather, life under the covenant), nor was it intended as an imperialistic code to be imposed upon those who do not accept it freely. I thus cannot automatically use it to condemn anyone who violates its directives, since those directives are for those who wish to respond to the divine initiatives ("I brought you up out of the land of Egypt; [therefore] you owe allegiance to me only; . . . do not do thus-and-so"). Israel is usually condemned for forgetting its identity, for going back on its loyalty oaths, rather than for action or failure to act, within itself.

Since the material was addressed to the community and was most often concerned with communal destiny, it should not automatically be transformed into spiritual guidance for individuals.

C. A biblical thought-unit (or literary unit: pericope) has, usually, one major thought, a central idea, although it may have corollaries, support data, images, and so on. I should seek to recover that central point and inquire of its relevance, rather than focusing upon issues that are at the periphery. Much modern preaching, in my opinion, goes astray precisely at this point. Some word or phrase in the text that "I can do something with" is seized upon and developed, very likely to the neglect of the entire unit. For example, a preacher in a university chapel was discussing Isaiah 7, which has to do with the prophet's grounds for hope amidst a political crisis. The preacher focused upon a part of verse 14: "shall call his name. . . ." We were told, as the point of the sermon, that God calls all of our names! "We
are all called!” In response I can only say: So I also presume, but it has nothing to do with Isaiah’s point, so why bother dragging him into it? Again, endless were the sermons I heard as a child about Queen Jezebel’s preparation for death by “painting her eyes and adorning her head” (II Kings 9:30). Thus, said the preachers, God condemns “painted Jezzy-belles” in the present. Unfortunately for such preaching, although the queen was condemned for a number of things, such grooming was not one of them. An incidental event in the text has provided the preacher with a hobbyhorse upon which to saddle his or her prejudices.

D. I may distinguish the meaning of a thought-unit from that of its larger literary context. What a prophet “really meant” may differ from what the disciples understood him to be saying and from the meaning that emerges when the oracle is placed in sequence with others. For example, what is the situation to which Isaiah 9:2-7 is addressed, and who is the prince who will be called “Wonderful Counselor” (v. 6)? While those questions may be debated, we note that Isaiah’s disciples (and editors) have placed verse 1 (Hebrew text 8:23) as a prose introduction, thus setting this poetic oracle in the context of the loss of Zebulon and Naphtali to the Assyrians in 733 B.C. That limits the candidates for “Wonderful Counselor” considerably, and also defines the nature of his task to include ending the Assyrian domination. Even if I cannot know the original setting of this text, I must be attentive to the opinion of its earliest interpreters, who placed it in its present context.

E. The message of an Old Testament text has an integrity of its own, apart from whatever differing interpretation the New Testament or the church (or the synagogue, for that matter) may have given to it. That is, the material had been found to be life giving, to be identity forming and identity sustaining,* long before the time of Christianity. It became “scripture” on its own terms and by its own power, apart from any sanction of the New Testament. To call the Old Testament “scripture,” therefore, is axiomatically to be open to its message for the communities in the present. The theological stance of the original author (or storyteller) has an integrity of its own, and the Word was preserved; the theological stance of the editorial arranger (tradition-gatherer)
has an integrity of its own, and the resultant Word was preserved; and the theological stance of later canonical interpreters (in New Testament and Talmud) has an integrity of its own, and the resultant Word was preserved. Rather than make denominational confession or express personal preference about which of these stances, if they are in tension, is "correct," we might bring all the stances into dialogue with one another.  

Thus I must begin by hearing Zechariah as Scripture, prior to my investigation of how the Evangelists understood Jesus in his light. This approach becomes especially important when the modern preacher utilizes the lectionary, lest the New Testament reading and the seasons of the church year become the predominant, if not sole, factor in hearing the Word.  

F. Prophets were persons whom the deity summoned to speak to their contemporaries from the perspective of the community's traditions. They sought to bring the community (the actual) into dialogue with the sacred story (the ideal), so that the former could be introspective, condemned, corrected, strengthened, or sustained. Their message was intended, therefore, for a specific audience in a specific circumstance, and not for persons in all times and places, and least of all as a prediction of events in the remote future. Yet, their words were perceived by the next generation as having enduring insights, not because of prediction, but because the believer's situation under the covenant tended to have similarities across the generations. Thus, to quote a cliché, the "prophets were not fore-tellers, but forth-tellers." Although they were concerned with the immediate future as a consequence of the present, they were not predictors in the sense that modern "psychics" claim to be.  

G. The interpreter should be cautious about spiritualizing the text, and in no case should begin by doing so. That is, we should try to bring it to bear upon the same type of problem that it was intended to address, rather than generalizing it so that it applies to whatever kind of spiritual problem the modern hearer may have. The "spiritualizing" approach, in an attempt to make the text "relevant," often draws a parallel between the physical (political, social, economic) problems of the biblical characters and the internal problems of the hearer. Thus Joseph, cast into a pit by his brothers (Genesis 37) serves as an opportunity to talk
about being psychologically “in the pits”\(^4\); hearing how David overcame the giant Goliath helps us not to be discouraged when we are confronted with the overwhelming power of sin.

H. The interpreter should be cautious about anthropologizing the text, thereby transforming it from a story about what God has done and can do into an assertion of what humans can do for themselves. Such an approach often leads to workshop-preaching in which the congregation is advised about “how to do so and so.” It encourages us to “think positively” and to use our innate abilities. (Such advice has considerable appeal to Americans with their “rugged individualism” mentality.) The traditional three steps in a Protestant sermon become three successive steps to take on the road to spiritual success. Thus we, following Elijah at the cave, may be exhorted to “Get up. . . . Look up. . . . Link up.”\(^5\) A good question to ask, before indulging in such an approach, is: Am I using this text in the same way that it was used within the biblical period itself, so that its life-giving power will be released now as it was then?

I. The interpreter should not begin by using the text as a source for moral examples, unless the original “point” was to hold up the biblical characters as “positive” or “negative” models to follow. One should learn to look beyond the morality of the persons in the text to the overall reason the story was preserved. Thus it is not so much that Abraham is hero (Gen. 15:6) or villain (Gen. 12:10-16, where he gives his wife to the Pharaoh), as that God preserves him regardless of how well he responds to the promise.

The moralizing sermon usually is based upon the text that is selected in accordance with the preconceived values of the selecter. Whatever those values may be, an appropriate model can be found in the biblical text, and one not necessarily lauded or condemned in the Scriptures themselves. In such a case, the “point” of the sermon originates in the mind of the interpreter and not in the text itself. Its authority is the preacher’s moral values, rather than the Bible.

J. Growth comes through challenge more than through confirmation of the status quo. Thus the Scriptures were preserved not only because they gave the community an identity, but because they corrected and judged. To acknowledge the text to be Scripture is
thus to submit to it, to listen carefully, to allow it to challenge and correct me, rather than for me automatically to seek to escape it by passing judgment on it. Thus I should be wary of an approach that begins by characterizing a text as "legalistic," "nationalistic," "chauvinistic," pre-Christian, or "old" Testament. Those materials, therefore, that I think I least need to hear, that I might choose last as a source for preaching, for which I resent the lectionary because they have been included, may be the very passages I most need to hear.

III. The Present: Possibilities for Addressing the "Believing Communities" (Church and Synagogue)

A. Possible false directions

1. "A meditation on the humiliation of the incarnation would be in order," suggests Reginald H. Fuller, seeking to draw together the "humble" king of Zech. 9:9 and the "gentle and lowly" Jesus of Matt. 11:29. But such an approach should be undertaken in my opinion only after the following limitations and cautions have been considered.

   a) The New Testament lesson (Matt. 11:25-30) has not only become the focus of the sermon, but it has been allowed to become the lens through which the Old Testament lesson will be interpreted. Zechariah's message to his own time, and the reasons for which it was subsequently preserved, have been ignored. (See Assumption E.)

   b) The demeanor of the coming king is not the point of the text in Zechariah, which has to do with the fact that the chosen people can rejoice in view of what God intends to do. God is the focus, not the king. Those modern interpreters who will accept Assumption C above will seek the main thrust of a text rather than emphasize subordinate information. (Part of the problem has been caused by the shortness of the passage in the Episcopalian lectionary, which Fuller very likely used.)

   c) It is not entirely clear that the king in our text is even described as "humble." Indeed, the portrait may be the exact opposite!

2. As exemplified by the coming king, post-exilic Judah learned that in "the suffering of the poor and wretched is God's purpose in history most clearly manifest. . . . The poor are blessed insofar as they are more human and humane than the
rich. . . . Of course, the rich and secure . . . are not judged and found wanting because of their riches . . . (but) because their power and security tend to bind them to the present world as it is. They are tempted to trust in their own strength. . . .”

Let us acknowledge that much that is said in this approach may well be true, even though no data is offered to support it (e.g., have studies been done to show that the poor are more humane than the rich?). Nonetheless, such an approach should bear in mind the following cautions:

a) It is not clear that the word (îîmîl), used to describe the coming king, means “poor” any more than it means “humble.” When a word in a text is problematic, one should not boldly take it as one’s point of departure in a sermon! And in no case does the text speak of “suffering”!

b) It is the reality, the reliability, of God’s action that is the point, not the attitude of the chosen instrument.

c) The king has been treated by the homiletician as a spiritual example for others to follow. But the text itself does not contain the faintest hint that the oracle was announced for that purpose, or that anyone in the original audience understood it that way, or that it was preserved and handed down with that lesson in mind. The text as interpreted above has ceased to be a message of hope to the community about its future, and has become the source from which modern individuals may derive a moral example.

3. “Today’s reading combines two quite distinct messianic prophecies. The first (verses 9-10) pictures the messianic king as a man of peace, whereas in verses 11-17 he is depicted as a warrior. . . . In verse 11b the captives were for the original author the exiles in Babylon after 586 B.C. In the Christian interpretation they stand for all men under the bondage of sin. The stronghold (v. 12a) in the original text meant the earthly Jerusalem. In the Christian interpretation it becomes the heavenly Jerusalem, the kingdom of God.” To this approach the following reactions may be made:

a) One must be careful not to understand a “messianic” passage as a prediction of the remote future. That the evangelists can understand Jesus by means of insights gained by
analogy from the oracles of the prophets does not mean that the prophet "predicted" the ministry of Jesus.

b) It is not at all clear that "two quite distinct" portraits of the coming king are contained in 9:9-17. After all, the portrait of the "man of peace" depends, in large measure, upon the meaning of the word *ānti*. If, however, it means "triumphant," then the portraits merge into one.

c) This "Christian interpretation" ignores the possibility that Zechariah can have a direct conversation with the church in the present.

d) The text is not addressed to "all men," but to the believing community. Nor are they accused of being "sinners."

B. A possible direction

The goal of this section is not to present a detailed description, and least of all a sermon outline. It is rather to suggest, however briefly, an idea that the preacher might pursue in view of the assumptions previously outlined.

We must begin by generalizing the text in some fashion, i.e., by assuming that it has relevance beyond its initial situation and audience. Unless we do this, it merely remains an archaic report about what someone once said or believed. When we identify ourselves with the believing community, however, we by definition accept the text as Scripture, i.e., as the identity-forming and identity-sustaining story of the ongoing community (Assumption A). Even the present shape of the text is an authorization to bring its message into dialogue with subsequent generations: verses 9-10 have been made to apply to a later age through the present editorial arrangement (see above). And since this text has been found to be life-giving and has been treasured across the generations (i.e., made a part of the canon), I should wrestle with it on its own terms apart from later interpretation.

But how shall I generalize the message, so that it may speak with integrity across the centuries? Obviously, I cannot do so by direct situational parallel, since I do not live in Palestine under the domination of the Greeks, or indeed under foreign domination of any sort.

Since this prophetic word was addressed to Israel as a whole (Assumption B), I probably should not begin by individualizing it and then spiritualizing it (which would be contrary to Assump-
tion G) by reflecting upon how "each of us" may feel oppressed in one way or another. And I should not go on to moralize the text by suggesting that we ought to evidence humility in the way that we deal with our problems.

Rather, I must inquire about how the mentality of the believing community in the present corresponds to that of our spiritual ancestors whom Zechariah addressed. That is, while the situation of the church or synagogue in contemporary America does not parallel that of Judah in the fourth century B.C. politically, it can be argued that life under the covenant does have analogies across the centuries. It is our threadbare faith in the future that may identify us with the prophet's long-vanished generation. More than two thousand years have passed since that time, and nothing that can be identified with the kingdom of God has yet arrived.

It has sometimes been argued that synagogue and church can be differentiated at this point: the former is left with an unfulfilled hope, whereas the followers of Jesus perceived, in the Incarnation and Resurrection, a formative sign of God's continuing involvement in history and an indication that the promises had been renewed. However, the oppressive policies of the Roman Empire continued unabated, and the general death-wardness of the world remained unchecked. Early Christianity then eschatologized and spiritualized aspects of the earlier faith: a heavenly Son of David reigns over the hearts of his followers and will one day reign from a new Jerusalem that has descended from heaven (Revelation 21). Thus in reality the church and synagogue stand on more even ground, each puzzled by reverses and delays in history, and each needing reassurance about the reliability of past tradition and about the openness of the future. Members of each may well wonder if participation in the life of the community is worth their time, energy, and finances.

Zechariah's response to this generation-transcending mentality, if it is to address us at all, must be shorn of its specificity in time, place, and instrumentality. Since the prophets of ancient Israel were not "psychic" prognosticators, we need not anticipate leadership by a physical descendant of David, situated in the city of Jerusalem. And many Christians, aware of
the realities of modern cosmology, can no longer accept the
eschatological transformation of the coming king into a
heavenly Christ who will "descend" from heaven (1 Thess. 4:16)
to purge the current evil world, tied as that expectation is to the
three-story cosmology of the ancient world.

Fortunately for our interpretation here, the issue of the
identity, activity, and even existence of the king is a secondary
one (see Assumption C). The basic expectation is about what
God will do; the coming king merely resumes a traditional form
of government that foreign domination has interrupted. He is
the momentary embodiment of an ongoing redemptive activity.
What one is asked to believe, therefore, is this: the world in
which we live is not as the deity intended it; it need not, and will
not, remain as it is.

But how are we to imagine that this transformation will take
place? That is beyond the role of prophets to say, but Zechariah
does hold in tension two aspects that we would do well to note.
While success depends upon the initiative and power of God ("I
will cut off. . . . I will set your captives free. . . . I will restore"),
the community itself has a decisive role to play ("Judah as my
bow . . . Ephraim its arrow . . . and wield you"). While the
kingdom of God cannot be achieved by an act of human will,
neither can it be achieved apart from the vision, the thirst, and
the involvement of human beings.

The homiletician, then, may review the nature of the
community's expectations for the future, especially as alluded
to here by the prophet (peace [v. 10], freedom [v. 11], security [v.
12], food [v. 17], and happiness [v. 17]). These expectations
must be reaffirmed, since they are the very gospel that called the
community into existence, and specific suggestions should be
made for how those expectations may begin to be actualized in
the local community.

It is interesting to compare this text with the Old Testament
lesson for July 12 (Isa. 55:1-5, 10-13), which is treated next. There
the role of the community in God's plans for the future is stressed
even more strongly and a role for a coming king vanishes.

V. The Lectionary Context

Since the readings from the epistle for the Pentecost season
are semicontinuous from one Sunday to the next, i.e., since the
goal is to read much of Romans in sequence, they are not intended to be congruent with the other readings. No attempt should be made by the homiletician, therefore, to press all three readings into a synthetic harmony.

When we seek the intended connection between the remaining lections (Rom. 7:15—8:13 and Matt. 11:25-30), we may stand in absolute astonishment. By focusing upon the nature of the coming king, and by accepting the traditional description ("humble") at face value, the lectionary tries to link this attitude with Jesus' description of himself as "lowly in heart" (v. 29)!

Jesus' hearers are invited to accept his yoke (v. 30), whereby the secret of God's kingdom is revealed (v. 25). However advisable that may be, it takes us far afield from the proclamation that the prophet Zechariah is trying to make.

The modern preacher may well be advised, then, to treat only one of the lections for today, an option that the preface to most lectionaries allows.

**SUNDAY, JULY 12**

**Lections**

|----------------------|----------------|-----------------|

**Exegesis and Exposition for Isaiah 55:1-5, 10-13**

1. **Background Information: What the Text Said to the Original Situation**

A. Where does a thought-unit begin and end? Is the lectionary division a proper one?

That verse 1 begins a separate proclamation is suggested not merely by the chapter division (although this is not an infallible guide), but also by the series of imperatives it contains. This verb-form is characteristic of the Second Isaiah's beginnings (e.g., 40:1; 51:1; 52:1). A different emphasis begins at verse 6, and in recognition of this the RSV leaves a space between verse 5 and verse 6. Thus verses 1-5 seem justified as a unit, thematically related to the major emphasis of this prophet. They are an oracle of salvation.
Verses 10-13 are not a continuation of this unit, either from the point of view of form or of content. Rather, they seem to have been editorially placed here as a conclusion to the entire collection of this Isaiah’s oracles: all that has been said previously is reliable and will accomplish its purpose. Thus one should realize that each section has an integrity of its own, and that by concentrating upon verses 10-13 one shifts the emphasis away from the startling and radical message that verses 1-5 contain.

The intervening verses (6-9) are part of another lection, 55:6-11.

B. What situation is addressed?

In 587 B.C. an event befell Judah that was unparalleled for the trauma it caused in all areas of Judah’s corporate existence. The sacred city of Jerusalem, believed to have been chosen as the seat of the eternal Davidic dynasty (II Samuel 7) and as the sole location the Lord had chosen “for his Name to dwell” (Deut. 12:5, 11, 21), fell to the Babylonians. The economy was ravaged, many cities were left in ruins, thousands were slaughtered or taken into exile in Babylonia, the Davidic Messiah taken captive, the temple gutted, and the religious self-understanding of the people shaken to the core. While some spokespersons proclaimed that this was a mere pause in God’s protection and that it would end within a year or so (thus the prophet Hananiah, in Jer. 28:1-4), others thought that it might last for a long time (so Ezekiel and Jeremiah). Slowly, as generations passed, hope (as in Ezek. 33:23-24) was drained from the exiles and replaced with despair (Ps. 137; 89:38-52; Lamentations). To the ancient hopes and promises, and to the possibility of renewal, the people now seemed deaf and blind (Isa. 42:18; 43:8), and they now began to accept the culture and gods of their captors (Isa. 44:9-20; 45:20-21; 46:1-7).

The prophet addresses this situation with two goals in mind: (1) to bolster the faltering faith of the exiles in Yahweh’s potent existence, and (2) to restore the ancient vision that Israel has been chosen, that she can be “a light to the nations” (49:6).

C. What word to the situation is announced?

The prophet approaches his first goal (above) in an unorthodox way: defeat and exile, rather than proving that there
is no god, or that Yahweh is impotent whereas Marduk is self-evidently in control of history, are evidence that Yahweh is the sole divine power in existence. Such control should be clear from the continuity between what God had announced through the prophets (doom, unless there was a change of priorities) and what has actually come to pass (exile). Thus other "gods" are challenged to announce the future and bring it to pass in a similar fashion (41:21-29). And since Yahweh has done this so successfully in the past, that is all the more reason why the word of deliverance now announced in this name should be believed. That deliverance even now takes shape in the activity of Cyrus, king of Persia (41:2-5; 44:24-45:8). The return home to Judah is described in heightened poetic language. Just as Israel was once in bondage and escaped across the Sinai Desert, so now a second exodus will utilize a "highway" that is being prepared across the Syrian Desert (40:3-4; 41:17-20).

The prophet's second goal is a more difficult one: to address the question of identity, once the return to Judah is effected. What is the status of promises to Abraham ("I will bless you . . . so that you will be a blessing," Gen. 12:2)? What is the future of the covenant enacted at Sinai (a part of which is that "you shall be to me a kingdom of priests," Exod. 19:5-6)? Will God's blessings continue to be mediated through the descendants of David ("I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever," II Sam. 7:13)? Can the demoralized remnants of Israel, even if they return home, again have faith in themselves as God's people? Can there indeed be a new beginning, not merely geographically, but theologically? Or was it all but a delusion, a beautiful ideal, that history has shattered forever? The prophet, undaunted by apparent reality, speaks in God's name to the exiles as "chosen . . . called . . . my servant" (41:9; cf. 44:1; 45:4; 48:20). God's "servant" will yet be a source of justice "to the nations" (42:1); Israel will be "a light to the nations" (42:6). Various groups, apparently non-Israelites, will begin to identify themselves with "the name of Jacob" and with Yahwism (44:5). God acts to deliver the exiles "that men may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none beside me" (45:6). "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth!"
... 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear' " (45:22, 23b).

It is in the context of this second goal that our text (55:1-5) must be placed, as the climax of the prophet’s point of view.

D. Comment on details in the text

Verse 1: What would the prophet’s invitation call to mind when it was heard by the Judeans in exile? There is the possibility that it was deliberately patterned so as to strike a familiar chord in the public ear. Some scholars have suggested that it was intended to echo Wisdom’s invitation to partake of her bounty that would lead to "the good life" (as in Prov. 9:5; Eccl. 24:19-22). Others suggest that it imitates the cries of street vendors, selling beverage and bread to those who pass by. It is more likely, in view of the reference to the Davidic monarch that follows, that the call imitates the invitation of the ancient Near Eastern monarch to participate at the banquet that marks his coronation (or even his annual reinstallment after relinquishing his throne and being subject to ritual humiliation). If so, the words would have had a curiosity-arousing effect, since Israel no longer had a king, or even a kingdom. In what sense, then, could such a royal invitation be issued?

Verse 2: The precise identity of the food “which does not satisfy” cannot be recovered, if indeed the prophet had a specific object/program/attitude in mind. Perhaps it refers to attempts to find meaning in Babylonian religion and culture, to find one’s identity elsewhere now that Israel’s traditional self-understanding has been shattered.

Verse 3: “That your soul may live” does not refer to the survival of the “soul” after death as some modern persons might plausibly think, but rather it means that the “person” (Hebrew: nefesh) may live to the full, as God intended. By accepting God’s word, as here announced by the prophet, meaningful covenant-existence will be restored.

Verse 3: The “everlasting covenant” referred to here is spelled out in full in II Sam. 7 and forms the basis of several of the Psalms (e.g., 2, 89, and 132). The Exile apparently means that the covenant has been broken, and this occasioned much puzzle­ment, despair, and loss of faith. (Note in particular Psalm 89: the covenant is reviewed in vv. 1-37, then the present
reality of destruction and exile is brought to mind in vv. 38-51).

Verse 4: "... witness ... leader ... commander." Presumably, the successes of the Davidic-Solomonic state (architecturally, militarily, economically, in the arts, and in philosophy-wisdom) are referred to. These successes brought Israel to the attention of the nations and attracted visitors far and wide (e.g., the Queen of Sheba). Presumably this was of some benefit for the spread of Yahwism (it is part of the means whereby the deity is "glorified").

E. Summary of the passage

The dependent Judean exiles are summoned as royal subjects to a banquet by the king (Yahweh). The food they are to consume will nourish and satisfy their souls, preserving them from death (i.e., from loss of meaning and identity). The divine promises, the basis of communal life, formerly mediated through the monarchy, are now transferred to the community as a whole. The breach in divine blessing, the Exile, is thus overcome as Israel assumes a new, yet old, self-understanding. A king, in the form of an existing direct descendent of David or of an ideal Messiah, is no longer needed. God's salvation, the realization of the deity's goals for and through the community, does not depend upon that office. Israel's impact upon the nations will not depend upon conquest, but presumably upon the gracious act that the deity will now perform in restoring the near-dead community to life. This will be done solely because the deity wills it, as an act of graciousness (as was the case of the covenant with David), and not because of any merit on Israel's part. It does not presuppose obligations that Israel must meet in order to keep the blessing in effect.

F. What specific mind-set is addressed?

In addition to the concerns outlined in "B," the specific problem seems to have been: How can the community survive? How can it have an identity apart from the Davidic monarchy through whom the divine blessings are mediated?

II. The Present: Possibilities for Addressing the "Believing Communities" (Church and Synagogue)

A. Possible false directions

1. Multiple sermon topics can be derived from this and other texts. Thus The Interpreter's Bible attempts to isolate themes in
verses 1, 2, and 3-5. But while each of them might be helpful to an individual congregation, it may be doubted that the prophet, or his audience, or those who transmitted and preserved this text, had all of them in mind. Thus we must protest that the "thrust" of the entire unit has not been sought and brought into dialogue with the present.

2. "Water, bread, wine, and milk are symbols for the life of God. . . . Countless folk . . . are wistful for a first hand assurance of and intercourse with the living God." While this statement undoubtedly is true, the following cautions must be raised about using it in connection with our text. The text does not speak of "everyone's need"—indeed, the Bible is not addressed to "everyone," but to Israel under the covenant. Instead, our text deals with a specific communal problem that has engendered doubt, and we need to ask, Is that kind of doubt manifest today by those who likewise accept the covenant?

3. "Central Thrust: The children of Israel were sons and daughters of a generous God." While one may applaud this attempt to isolate the "central thrust," one may question whether it has in fact been done. The generosity of God, although quite evident in this text, is hardly the point the prophet wanted to make; it is too much an abstraction. Rather the generosity, at a given time and place, results in a specific action for Israel and anticipates a given response. Rather than deal with this on a communal level, the homiletician has individualized the text and then read it through Christian eyes: "Obedience, then, must be our response . . . (in response to) what God has done for us in Christ." Hardly what Isaiah had in mind! Why bring him into it at all, if that is what the preacher wants to say?

B. A possible direction
Since this text was addressed to the community in its entirety, I must inquire whether those who constitute the continuation of the community in the present face a related problem. That is, I should not begin by trying to relate it to individuals outside the community who may yearn to "come to the waters." But what point of contact with the text can we have, given the fact that the church and synagogue in the present, at least in the United States of America, are not under foreign domination and thus
thwarted in self-realization? The connection lies not in physical similarity of situation, but in similarity of mentality. We may doubt, as did the Judeans, that there could be hope for the future in terms of communal coherence, identity, and viability. The ancient mentality was this: without the Davidic monarch, the focus of communal action and the channel through which divine blessing was thought to flow, how can the community be "a light to the nations"? In response, some elements of the population took refuge in otherworldly expectations: a more-than-human messiah would yet arise, intervene in history, and redeem a "fallen" creation.31

In relatively recent times (the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), the Protestant church was, by and large, characterized by a zeal to transform human society, by the belief that it could make a difference in the world. Hence hymns boldly proclaimed, "Rise up, O men of God! . . . Bring in the day of brotherhood." But, in more recent times, the events of history have negated many of the previous gains and pessimism has become widespread: "Sit down, O men of God! . . . You cannot do a thing." For many Christians, this has encouraged the revival of otherworldly speculation, and hence the popularity of writers like Hal Lindsey.

Our text sought to give the community confidence in itself, to decrease its reliance upon the office of monarch, and it does this in the face of overwhelming odds. It may suggest that we are not to dwell despondently, waiting for "a son of David" to descend from heaven and do the task for us through a miraculous transformation of the world. The community itself, as a whole, is God's "son." It is through the faith, the obedience, and the action of the people of God that the "kingdom" may arise. And this can be true, not because the people themselves have the power to do it, but because God wills and promises it.

Certitude that this divine word will become reality is expressed in verses 10-13, the second part of the lection for the day, and to that we now turn.

III. The Second Part of the Lection, 55:10-13

These verses most likely were written at a different time and for a different situation than were verses 1-5. Note how the RSV, in recognition of a transition, has left a wide space between verse
9 and verse 10. Whereas verses 1-5 are an oracle of salvation, prefaced by invitations to the despondent exiles, verses 10-11 are a description of the power of the divine Word. Whatever their original function, the latter verses seem to have been deliberately placed at the end of the entire collection (chaps. 40–55) as a fitting conclusion: that which has been announced is sure to be fulfilled. The transition from one unit to the other is smooth, since the deity speaks (first person) in both parts: “I will make. . . .” (v. 3); “so shall my word . . . .” (v. 11). Thus, as editorially arranged, these verses are not an abstract discussion of the power of God’s Word to come to realization. Rather they are applied to a specific situation: the previously announced oracles of salvation (chaps. 40–55) will come to actualization just as surely as rain falling from heaven causes vegetation to grow, rather than returning to the skies. (See Assumption D.)

There is also a transition between verse 11 and verse 12, again acknowledged by the space in RSV. In verses 12-13 the prophet speaks, referring to the deity (v. 13), and refers to Israel in the plural ("you," v. 12). The book ends as it began (40:3-5), with a lyrical portrait of the return of Judah. And this event, like that of the Exile before it, will be a sign to future generations: when they hear of it, they will find courage amidst their own doubts (v. 13).

IV. The Lectionary Context

The epistle continues a semisequential reading of the book of Romans. Thus it is to be read for its own content and is not necessarily intended to be related theologically to the other two lections. 

*Seasons of the Gospel* has coupled 55:1-5, 10-13, with Matthew 13:1-23, "the parable of the sower." But the interpreter should be aware that the Gospel passage relates primarily to verses 10-13 (vv. 10-11, really), and that this shifts the emphasis away from the "point" of verses 1-5. One might be well advised, therefore, to deal with 55:1-5 on its own, or with verses 10-11 plus the Gospel. Even here, however, there is a jarring discontinuity. Whereas the prophetic material announces the freely given, powerful, self-actualizing Word of God, the Gospel material stresses the differing possibilities for the
reception of the Word: the nature of the soil affects the growth-rate of the seed. Thus the Gospel tries to answer a question of the community in the first century, a question that is not identical to that of the exiles some six hundred years earlier.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 9

Lections

1 Kings 19:9-18 Romans 9:1-5 Matthew 14:22-33
Exegesis and Exposition of 1 Kings 19:9-18

I. Background Information: What the Text Said to the Original Situation

A. Where does a thought-unit begin and end? Is the lectionary division a proper one?

The scene at the cave (vv. 9-18) is an integral part of the larger account of Elijah's flight from Queen Jezebel that culminates in the choice of Elisha as his successor (19:1-21). There is no reason to believe that the lection ever existed as a separate unit of tradition (save for vv. 11-14, as we shall see). Thus one cannot begin the public reading with verse 9 and assume that the congregation will understand the episode: there will be no antecedent for the "he" who arrives at the cave, no understanding of why he goes there, and no appreciation for what he is subsequently commanded to do. Nonetheless, it could be argued that the full account is a bit long for public recitation in the service of worship and that the present shortened version is justified if a few words of introduction are supplied by the reader. This is all the more allowable, since the "point" of the longer account is contained in the portion that has been selected. (One should not always assume that this is the case with lectionaries, however!)

Other lectionaries have not chosen as wisely as Seasons of the Gospel and COCU have done. The Roman Catholic and Episcopal selections conclude at verse 13a and verse 12, respectively. This has the effect of perverting the intent of the unit, as we shall see.

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B. Is the account composite, or is it one unified whole?
This question has considerable significance for the meaning of the passage as well as for where the lection may end.
The prophet, despondent that his victory over the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel (chap. 18) has resulted in a threat to his life rather than in a reversal of royal policy (19:1-3), has fled to the sacred mountain. Thereupon he is asked his mission (v. 9), and he responds that he is the sole surviving loyal Yahwist (v. 10). Then follows the scene at the mouth of the cave, which seems to clarify the means through which the deity may be perceived (vv. 11-13). Sensitive readers have long been puzzled by the repetition that now takes place. The deity poses the same question as before (v. 13b), and the prophet repeats his lament (v. 14). Only then does the deity seem to acknowledge the purpose for which the prophet has made the journey to the sacred mountain.
The astute observer will note that verses 11-14 seem to intrude into the larger context: one can read verses 9-10 and then go to verses 15-18 with no sense of loss. Does this suggest the possibility that verses 11-14 have a separate origin and purpose? The literary structure supports this conclusion. Insertions into ancient documents sometimes were written so as to end with the same phrase as does the point at which they were inserted. Thus an editor might conclude the insertion with the phrase “and they seek my life, to take it away” (v. 14), corresponding to the wording of the base text at verse 10.
If this is true, then those lectionaries that conclude at verse 12 or 13 have failed to allow the main narrative to reach its conclusion.
C. Comment on details in the text
Verse 9: “cave.” Whether this is a deliberate reference to the “cleft of the rock” (Exod. 33:21) in which Moses stood to sense the divine presence cannot be said with confidence.
Verse 10: “I only.” An exaggeration, as verse 18 shows. To the discouraged prophet, it only seemed thus.
Verse 11: “passed by.” The same expression as in Exod. 33:22. Thus the prophet will sense the divine presence, which he has come to seek, just as Moses sensed it previously.
Verses 11-12: “wind . . . earthquake . . . fire.” Possible
allusions to the events of Exod. 19:18 and elsewhere, when the deity appeared to Moses.

Verse 12: "a still small voice." The Hebrew text is exceedingly difficult to translate, as the following variations show. NEB: "a low murmuring sound"; JB: "the sound of a gentle breeze"; NAB: "a tiny whispering sound." The Hebrew words involved are: qol, "voice, sound"; demamah, "silence"; and daqqa, "small, thin." Contextually, the phrase may be taken to mean "the sound of utmost silence," in contrast to the cataclysms of nature that have just preceded it.

Verse 14: "jealous." Zealous, passionate action for the causes of the deity. The word is used elsewhere to describe the actions of the deity (Deut. 5:9).

Verses 15-16: "you shall anoint Hazael... and Jehu." These actions were actually carried out by Elisha (II Kings 8:7-15; 9:1-13). Apparently there were parallel accounts of these events, one involving Elijah and the other Elisha. An editor seems to have combined them in such a way that the first (where Elijah would have done the anointing, as we would expect) has been lost. The result is an apparent contradiction.

Verse 18: "seven thousand." The earliest idea of a righteous remnant. It will play a major role in subsequent biblical reflections.

D. What situation(s) are addressed?

This is a most difficult question, given the possibly composite nature of the scene and the complex development of the books of Kings. One could speak of the original audience (or prophetic circle wherein an individual episode might be recited); one could speculate about the reasons this limited collection of Elijah-stories (I Kings 17-19; 21; II Kings 1:1-17) was gathered and arranged in just this fashion, and when; and one could speak of the function the Elijah-Elisha stories have within the later framework of the "former prophets" (Joshua–Kings). I will limit my remarks to the first two of these.

The episode at the cave, as well as the other Elijah-Elisha stories, we may assume to have been preserved by the prophets' disciples. Such stories will have been repeated, at least in part, to form and maintain the identity of the prophetic guilds as they faced the competition of rival groups (I Kings 18:19-40; II Kings
3:13) and as they encountered opposition by the royal family (1 Kings 18:4, 12-15; 19:1-3). Thus the collection may have taken shape close to the time of the prophets themselves, very likely in the ninth century B.C.)

The competing prophetic groups, associated with the Canaanite fertility cults, will have had an innate appeal and even an advantage over Yahwism. Since agriculture was at the basis of the Israelite economy, it would have been natural for the farmer to be lured to the myth and ritual of the god Baal. And Yahwism, associated in sacred tradition with Israel’s desert wanderings and battles, may have seemed remote from everyday concerns. Furthermore, catastrophic intervention and deliverance, commonplace in tradition, no longer seemed to be happening. Thus the prophets of Yahweh were prosecuted with impunity and reduced to hiding in caves (1 Kings 18:13).

A slightly different concern may underlie verses 11-14. How is it that the deity is to be perceived in the present? And what is Elijah’s authority as head of a prophetic guild? Is this why the story contains allusions to the Mosaic tradition?

E. What word is addressed to the situation?

The harassed Yahwists, in the form of surreptitious prophetic guilds, found comfort and direction in two aspects of their master Elijah’s experience on Mount Horeb. Those aspects, which may once have been emphasized in separate versions, were soon combined into a single account. The scene at the cave thus comes to have two phases.

In the first phase, there are deliberate allusions to the experience of Moses at this same place. The prophet is commanded to “stand . . . before the Lord,” an honor otherwise accorded Moses alone and that other mortals presumably could not have survived. Both leaders sensed the divine presence as it “passed by,” each standing in a recess in the rock (Exod. 33) and each hiding his face (Exod. 3). Both experienced the forces of nature with which theophany has traditionally been associated. And yet, for Elijah, the deity is not revealed in the same way as previously. Presumably it will be different hereafter; a new age of revelation is beginning: “The era of theophany is now closed.” The deity is now to be perceived, presumably, in the way that prophets perceive the divine word. And thus
Elijah’s mode of perception is legitimized and serves as a paradigm for those who follow him.

The second phase has an entirely different mood. The prophet must enter into the arena of history in very specific ways: he must help arrange a change of dynasty, and he must ensure the continuation of his work through a successor (Elisha). In addition, he is assured of a new sociological reality wherein the divine purpose will be achieved: a remnant has been and will remain faithful, and thus will form the nucleus for a new age. The “believing community” thus transcends the rise and fall of secular power structures.

When the two scenes are combined, the former is accommodated to the latter. The prophet, seeking some direction amidst the perplexities of the present, retreats to the sacred mountain. Surely here God will seem real and there will be assurance of some miracle that will transform the present social realities. Instead, there is only silence—a silence so conspicuous that it could, in effect, be heard. And then comes the perception of the divine presence in absence: “What are you doing here, Elijah? Return to the world of Ahab and Jezebel!” It is through human beings, active in history, that the deity will be revealed.

II. The Present: Possibilities for Addressing the “Believing Communities” (Church and Synagogue)

A. Possible false directions

1. “Elijah was in the cave mood. . . . When a person is shut into the cave mood, he needs a larger mental setting in time as well as in space. . . . The physical shut in and the socially shut out can keep company with Plato and Augustine, with Shakespeare and Luther. . . . (Elijah) had slumped into smallness of soul, where he was victimizing himself by a vindictive spirit.”

Granted that everything that the homiletician suggests here may well be true. But are the “cave moods” described here the same as Elijah’s, and is the remedy the same? The text has been generalized, not merely by applying it to others, but by redefining the nature of the problem involved. Elijah’s problem is largely political and theological; the homiletician’s is physical (shut in) and sociological (shut out). In general, the text has been
spiritualized (thus in tension with my Assumption G, July 5 exegesis).

However one may feel about the appropriateness of such spiritualizing generalizations, the point remains: the concerns of the text remain undiscussed. The profundity of the original point is obscured by the derived/manufactured/extended profundity of the homiletician.

2. "Note the steps by which the Lord delivered Elijah. . . . First of all, he had to get up. . . . 'You will never know what you can do until you try.' "

It is true that the text announces God's continuing involvement and that it calls upon the prophet to act. But one must be careful to keep these two emphases in balance, and especially not to lose sight of the former. One must not basically anthropomorphize the text by saying, "You can do it!" Such an approach was also evident in the previous section where we were advised, "Read a book!" If the preacher wants to give that sort of advice, the Bible need not necessarily be cited as the authority for doing so. Indeed, there is nothing theological about it. Elijah would scarcely have been helped by it. (Such an approach is contrary to my Assumption H, July 5.)

3. "In God's service, to have a name is not important. . . . How few are content to remain anonymous and nameless. . . ."

Granted that Elijah calls attention to himself as the sole faithful Yahwist. But he does so, not to aggrandize himself, but to express his despair at failure: even an event such as the victory at Carmel (chap. 18) has had no visible impact upon governmental policy. We might therefore conclude that the prophet's action now is understandable, thus linking ourselves with him, rather than to denounce him as reprehensible. Moreover, the homiletician has tried to moralize the story, when no negative moral example was intended by those who preserved this story and made it into Scripture. (Such an approach is in tension with Assumption I, July 5.)

4. "By watching the storm, the prophet's eyes were opened to his own weakness. . . . The blustering physical forces were superseded by the quiet spiritual resources. The stormy Elijah was learning the gentleness of true gianthood."

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This approach may be objected to on several grounds: (a) It mistakes the point of the first phase of the theophany (vv. 11-14). Rather than an attempt to correct Elijah's previous disposition, the text seems to suggest instead the means by which the deity is to be perceived. As far as I can tell, the prophet is not accused of being overly "stormy." (b) The homiletician is attempting to draw a moral example from the text, where none was intended. (c) If the prophet is being taught "gentleness," it certainly is surprising that he subsequently is directed to take steps that will lead to mass slaughter (vv. 15-17) and assassination (II Kings 8:7-15; 9:1-28).

B. A possible direction

That this text "speaks the truth" about life under the covenant will be self-evident to many members of the "believing communities" in the present. Our own experience may well have duplicated it. That this was also true for the prophet's disciples helps account for the fact that the story was preserved. And that so many generations have seen in it an expression of reality may serve to encourage the despondent believer in the present to ponder its points of view.

Many of those in the present who have sought to bring the gospel to bear upon the economic, social, and political realities of our society will know the sense of futility that Elijah evidences. It can lead to loneliness, the questioning of one's identity, and even to death—as in the case of Martin Luther King, Jr. (And thus we are made contemporaries with Elijah in the major part of the narrative: vv. 9-10.)

Similarly, many believers in the present will be aware of the sometime difficulty of experiencing the divine presence at the "tried and true" locations and under the traditional forms. Surely, if we could just create the right conditions, the deity would be heard, loud and clear. If we could just get away from our frustrations, just have some time to commune with the forces of "nature" and presumably with the God who lies behind them, just have a little "R and R," surely our spiritual "batteries" would be charged. But the deity remains a free agent whose presence cannot be demanded, and we may encounter instead only the silence of the soul. (And thus we become contemporaries with the Elijah of vv. 11-14.)
The prophet, hoping to recover his vision and confidence in the possibility of a different future for his people, has retreated to the location of “tried and true” religious experience, where it all started. But behind the very forces where tradition had said a divine power was making its presence known, there was for Elijah only silence. And as he reflected upon this he was brought to the realization that, after all, the deity was at work in the very place from which he had fled. “What are you doing here, Elijah? I am at work amidst the hard realities and dangers of society, and in the lives of human beings. There is, for the present, to be no other way. It is through history, perhaps beyond your immediate perspective, that I am working to create a community that transcends geographical region and survives the changing of political regimes. Even now the faithful are more numerous and in more locations than you have imagined. I am doing this, but you have a role to play. Get on with it!”

As I worship with new congregations, far distant from where I grew up, I am comforted and strengthened to realize that here, beyond my knowledge, a segment of the “believing community” has existed for generations, and that it contains persons older, wiser, and more tried and tested than I.

III. The Lectionary Context

The reading from the epistles continues through Romans, with no intended connection with the other two. The pastor who wants to reflect upon its contents should do so in isolation from the other readings.

The reading from the Gospel (Matt. 14:22-33) is the familiar account of “Jesus walking on the water.” The connection with the account in Kings is, at first glance, superficial: the storm on the lake parallels the cataclysms at the sacred mountain, and each is followed by a perception of the divine presence. But perhaps there is a valid continuity of theme. The prophet is recommissioned, and the disciples are exhorted to keep their faith amidst the storm of persecution through which the early Christian community is passing. The greater specificity of the Old Testament text must not be lost, however. Unlike the disciples of Jesus, who are exhorted to have faith rather than doubt, and who end up confessing that Jesus is “the Son of God,” the disciples of Elijah were moved to go beyond
endurance and confession to concrete activity in the international political arena.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 16

Lections


Exegesis and Exposition of Isaiah 56:1-8

1. Background Information: What the Text Said to the Original Situation
   A. The historical situation addressed

   The edict of Cyrus, king of Persia (539 B.C.), allowed those Judeans who desired to do so to return home (II Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4) after their long exile in Babylonia. Many of them may have done so with high expectations and with the lyrical oracles of the Second Isaiah (chaps. 40-55) ringing in their ears. Soon thereafter (ca. 530 B.C.), attempts to restore the temple were begun (Ezra 5:14-6:12), but various difficulties delayed its completion (Haggai 1:1-11). When a new king of Persia (Darius) came to the throne (522), and when Judean prophets (Haggai, Zechariah) began stressing that the welfare of the people depended upon it, work on the temple began in earnest (520) and was completed about 515 B.C.

   Thereafter internal strife (e.g., struggles for power by factions of the priesthood, prophets, monarchists, and so on) and external hindrances (reflected especially in Nehemiah) produced a reality that was in sharp contrast to the expectations of the exilic Second Isaiah (see, e.g., Malachi). The hopes and frustrations of this early post-exilic community are reflected in the so-called Third Isaiah (chapters 56-66). (That the prophet lived in Jerusalem is clear from such passages as 62:6; 64:10-12; and 66:6, whereas the author of chapters 40-55 was among the exiles in Babylonia.)

   B. The literary context

   Chapters 60-62, which some scholars (e.g., C. Westermann) regard as the earliest part of the message (its core), announce
salvation to the returned exiles, forming good continuity with the Second Isaiah. Other exiles shall return (60:4), the economy will recover (60:4-7), and there will be security (60:10, 18). Not only that, the nations round about will be attracted to the deity who has recently acted so marvelously in the people's behalf (60:6, 14; 61:9; 62:2), and this despite the meager beginnings in the present. But the mere fact (or even the miracle) of the return does not automatically bring the "kingdom of God," for that yet remains to be accomplished. Second Isaiah has called for faith; Third Isaiah now calls for action.

C. What are the boundaries of our unit?

That there is a transition from 55:13 is clear, not merely from the chapter division but by the shift in emphasis: from a concluding vision of prosperity, joy, and peace (55:12-13) to a rallying cry for obedience in a present difficult circumstance (56:1-2). Also, that there is a transition between verse 8 and verse 9 is clear. The previous matter has been addressed to foreigners in Judah's midst, assuring them of their place in the community; the subsequent material is an attack upon the present leadership. Thus 56:1-8 seems to be a defensible unit. Yet it clearly has two emphases, if not constituent parts: verses 1-2 plus verses 3-8. The former is a call for obedience, especially in terms of keeping the sabbath; the latter is a discussion of the constituency of the community.

It is very likely that verse 8 was once a separate oracle or fragment of an oracle. Note how the formula "Thus says the Lord God" is used to begin an oracle at 43:1; 44:6; 45:1, 14; 49:7. Thus we may conclude that verse 8 has been linked editorially with verses 1-7 because of thematic similarity.

D. What questions are addressed?

(1) What are the obligations of members of the community now that they have returned from exile? (2) What is the status of those who are not Judeans by birth or who otherwise might be excluded from the revamped community? The pre-exilic community had regulations touching on these matters. Deuteronomy 23:1-8 specified that those with deformed genitals, the illegitimate, and Ammonites-Moabites could not participate in Israel's worship. But now, dangers to the restored community are perceived on two fronts: (a) in the syncretistic tendencies of
the people in Samaria, where the Assyrian conquerors had settled large contingents of foreigners after 721 B.C., and (b) among elements within Judah. Their religious ideas have been contaminated by generations-long settlement in Babylonia during the Exile. It is not surprising therefore, that these Deuteronomic restrictions should now be generalized to include all foreigners. Indeed, during a later period, Ezra and Nehemiah forced Judean males to divorce their wives of foreign birth (presumably because of their possible detrimental religious influence upon future generations). But such action will be in tension with the expectations of the Second Isaiah that, upon Israel's release from captivity and return to the "promised land," foreigners will be attracted to Israel's God. The latter emphasis is continued by the Third Isaiah, who speaks now of "foreigners who have joined themselves to the Lord" (56:6). The antipathy which some of them seem to have encountered is cited in a lament in verse 3: "Let not the foreigner . . . say, 'The Lord will surely separate me. . . .'

E. Comments on details in the text
Verse 1: "keep . . . do." Israelite religion places much stress upon obedience, action, and the creation of a society that is in accordance with the divine will. Response to God is not merely a mental attitude but concrete action.
Verse 1: "soon." God's promise and intention for the people is more than mere possession of the land (cf. the various dimensions of the promise in Gen. 12:1-3). Thus for them to have returned does not mean that their blessing or their obligations are completed.
Verse 1: "salvation." Life as God intended it for the people. It has physical, psychological, social, and religious dimensions. It is entirely this-worldly.
Verse 2: "sabbath." This day had a very minor place in pre-exilic thought, but at the time of the Exile it assumes a crucial place in Israel's religious life. The priestly leadership during the Exile presumably sought some inalienable reminder of identity for the depressed and wavering community. Those practices which had been formerly commanded (festivals and sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem) were now impossible to keep with the temple in ruins. The sabbath, however, could be celebrated
wherever one found oneself; it was indispensable as a means of calling the ancient deeds of Yahweh to mind and thus giving the community coherence and direction. Thus the Creation story that culminates in the ordaining of this day (Gen. 1:1-2:4) was now added as a preface to Israel's earlier collection of sacred stories.

Verse 3: "foreigner" (nekar). That some foreigners have become proselytes is denoted by what very likely is a formal phrase: "who has joined himself to the Lord." Some of them presumably did so in response to the invitation of the Second Isaiah (45:20-25): "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth!... To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear" (vv. 22a, 23b). By contrast, it is this very term that Nehemiah used to denote those who must be severed from the community (9:2). But whereas the canonical literature had previously excluded only Ammonites and Moabites (Deut. 23:1-8), there was now an effort by Judeans to "separate themselves from the peoples of the lands...the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites" (Ezra 9:1).

Verse 3: "eunuch." These people likewise had been excluded from the assembly by Deuteronomy 23:1-8, but without a specific reason (in contrast to the Ammonites-Moabites, who had opposed Israel's entry into the land at the time of Moses-Joshua). Presumably the reason was that they could not receive God's blessing in the form of progeny (cf. Gen. 15:2) and could not contribute to the future life of the community (thus fulfilling the command of Gen. 9:1).

Verse 5: "house." The temple in Jerusalem. It was not mentioned in the oracles of Second Isaiah (chaps. 40-55) and so illustrates the differing locales and concerns of the two prophets.

Verse 5: "monument." The Hebrew word (yad) has a variety of related meanings: hand, penis, monument. The monument, like sexual activity, is a means whereby one's memory is perpetuated; the monument may bear physical similarity to the raised forearm ("hand"). Hence the childless Absalom erected a monument to his own memory, and it came to be called "Absalom's monument (yad)" (II Sam. 18:18).
Verse 5: "name." The Hebrew word (šem) can mean both one's name and the offspring through which the name is perpetuated. Thus the prophetic oracle punningly proposes a substitute for penis and offspring, through which the same divine blessing will be realized. (Yad veShem, incidentally, is the name chosen by the modern state of Israel for the memorial in Jerusalem to those whom the Nazis slew and thus deprived otherwise of "monument and name.")

Verse 6: "to minister." Foreigners may not only worship in the temple but also assist in cultic activity, in contrast to the priestly legislation that became normative and limited such activity to Levites and Aaronites. For a similar statement of inclusiveness, see 66:21.

F. What word is announced to the situation?

(I here structure the "answers" in the same way that the "questions" were posed above, in section D.)

1. What is required is not merely acceptance of God's miraculous restoration. There must be obedience to the norms of the covenant: keep justice, do righteousness, keep the sabbath, avoid evil. And it is the keeping of the sabbath in particular that is important for communal (and individual) life and self-understanding.

This is a remarkable shift in emphasis from the message of Second Isaiah. Whereas the latter might well have begun this oracle with what the deity has done ("God's salvation is at hand; he creates you anew; he creates in you a new righteousness"), the Third Isaiah stresses what Israel must do.

2. Membership in the community is not a matter of birth but of resolve, of "choosing the things which please the Lord," of "holding fast (God's) covenant." For those who are unable to preserve their identity through offspring, the community may become a substitute. Through it, one contributes to something that is ongoing and in which the memory of the righteous is preserved.

A new era in God's saving activity has begun. Not merely has the community been returned to its land (rerealizing the ancient promise to Abraham) but membership depends upon righteous action, and that opens the door to participation to anyone who wills. The saving activity is not limited to one people or to one
event: it is ongoing, since "yet others" will be gathered to the "outcasts of Israel" (v. 8.)

II. The Present: Possibilities for Addressing the "Believing Communities" (Church and Synagogue)

A. A possible false emphasis

"In a symbolic way it is a prophecy foreshadowing the universalism of the gospel. It points to a time when the temple of God will be a house of prayer for all people. It thus points forward to the effects of Christ's redeeming work."\(^{50}\)

Such an approach fails to acknowledge the text as Scripture on its own terms. Rather than applaud its point of view and seek to bring it into dialogue with the present, the homiletician treats the text more as a mere step in the right direction. Its importance for the church lies, it would seem, in the appearance of "foreshadowing" and "pointing to" that which transcends it. And if indeed that is its function, then why should we bother to read the text at all? Why bother with an archaic account of "foreshadowing" for any other than historical reasons? (See Assumption E, and compare Assumption A, July 5) Such language has a potential for leading the congregation to view the prophets of ancient Israel as predictors of the remote future (in opposition to Assumption F) rather than as God's spokesman who sought to address the enduring problems of the community.

Furthermore, it is not accurate to suggest that, with the ministry of Jesus, the prophet's expectations were "fulfilled."\(^{51}\) It is true that the openness of the Second and Third Isaiahs to non-Israelites did not become the norm of the post-exilic community, as is evidenced by the aforementioned restrictions on marriage by Ezra and Nehemiah. Nonetheless, there remained in some quarters an earnest desire for the expansion of the community, as seen in the description of the evangelical zeal of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:15. But anyone who suggests that the church, at least today, evidences the "universalism of the gospel"\(^{52}\) should be reminded of racially exclusive congregations, of the social-strata differentiations that have been transported into the local church and serve to turn persons away, and of the "moral majority's" divisive pressures toward conformity.
To anyone who would object, "But such divisive policies are a perversion of the ideal," my response would be, "Exactly, and that is true of past as well as present, of pre-New Testament and post-New Testament time." We have ideals expressed by Isaiah, and we have ideals expressed by Jesus; none have been infallibly actualized across the ages. Once the Old Testament is acknowledged to be Scripture, then it can proclaim an ideal as loudly and as clearly as can the New Testament, and sometimes more so.

B. Possible directions

1. The interpreter might focus upon verses 1-2, since they have an emphasis of their own: the proclamation of salvation. There is always a tendency for members of the community to become discouraged about how slowly things change, about how imperceptible is the "kingdom of God." The exiles, having returned home to find frustrating problems even there, must have felt that "the more things change, the more they remain the same." This societal reality, plus the resultant discouragement, is the mentality-in-common that binds us to our spiritual ancestors at the time of the prophet and thus allows his word to transcend its original situation and to speak to us.

The despondent returnees are encouraged to obey, nonetheless, and are assured anew of the deity's involvement in their history. In particular, they must utilize the day that has been ordained for identity-forming and identity-sustaining reflection: the sabbath. Otherwise it will be difficult for the community to survive the problems that history thrusts in its path.

Since this emphasis upon action, reinforced by the promise of happiness, is slightly different from that of the Second Isaiah, the interpreter might bring the two points of view into dialogue (on the same, or on separate occasions). There is, on the one hand, God's unmerited salvation. It cannot be earned or coerced. And there is, on the other hand, the need to act, to participate in the formation of the community that the deity has proclaimed to be desirable. And that leads to a divinely ordained happiness.

Both points of view are true to the experience of our spiritual ancestors, and both are found in the material we call Scripture. Thus it is not our task to set them in contrast and make value judgments ("justification by faith" as superior to "works
righteousness"). Rather, by definition, Scripture is that which judges and informs us, and not the reverse (Assumption J).

2. The interpreter might focus upon verses 3-8, which give the prophet's views upon membership in the community. He suggests, in the name of the deity, that those who "love the Lord" and are willing to take concrete action in service are welcome as members regardless of national origin or previous religion. The exclusivistic mentality that he is addressing still may characterize segments of the community today, and again this is our point of contact with the text. Then as now the basis for exclusion is often racial, but by extension it might now be the cliquishness of "family churches," differing credal affirmations, or many others.

Verses 4-5 will seem most alien to the modern reader. Eunuchs are not as common in our society as they were in the ancient Near East, and in any case no one is crusading for their exclusion. Shall we then pass over these verses as a quaint historical note that has no theological relevance for us? Before we do so, we should note the shift in emphasis in the prophet's line of thought: from prerequisites for membership to a form of blessing that accrues to those who "love the Lord" and "have joined themselves" to the community.

Not only may eunuchs share the near-universal human fear of being forgotten by future generations, they also are especially vulnerable since they do not have the biological means of combatting it through offspring. It is this same fear, a helplessness in the face of death and of the destruction that passing time brings to our possessions, that unites us with the ancient eunuch, even though we may not share his more acute biological limitation.

Humans have tried to cope with their mortality in a variety of ways, among them heroic deeds (which may be memorialized in literature), philanthropic acts (especially those that create enduring physical structures), the search for a means of physical rejuvenation (ranging from ancient Gilgamesh's magic plant to modern jogging), and denial (avoidance of discussion, use of euphemisms, and belief in the innate immortality of the soul). In ancient Israel as elsewhere, some comfort was taken at the presence of offspring who would continue to "call one's name"
and care for one’s possessions. Childlessness was thus a curse, to be overcome, however unsatisfactorily, through adoption.54

The prophet, while discussing the blessing that the Lord will bestow upon the eunuch who “loves the Lord”, provides a wider perspective in which to view the problem of human mortality. The believing community is an ongoing entity that survives the passing of individuals or generations. One thus can contribute to something that is significant and that endures, thereby achieving “monument and name” (as a substitute for “genitals and offspring”: see above).57

Whether the prophet also has in mind that the heroes of the faith will be better remembered by name within this community than among their offspring is not clear. In any case, that is a perspective that later literature seems to reflect:

Let us now sing the praises of famous men, . . . .
All these won fame in their own generation . . . .
There are others who are unremembered;
they are dead, and it is as though they had never existed.
(Ecclesiasticus 44:1, 7, 9 NEB)

It is entirely appropriate, psychologically and theologically, that to this day the names of the faithful who have died within the last year are read annually in a service of worship in the synagogue.

Why should not the churches post or otherwise make conspicuous the names of all those who have preceded the present congregation in the faith? And why is it that the clergy have failed to impart to the population-at-large a sense of the importance of synagogue or church? Presumably dedication to and memorialization by secular institutions has more appeal to the average person.

NOTES
2. For the suggestion that the word should be vocalized 'īnff (participle of the little-used verb 'nh, “triumphant,” see B. Kohler, “Sacharaja IX 9. Ein Neuer Übersetzungsvorschlag,” Vetus Testamentum, 21 (1971), p. 370. For the less likely possibility that it should be vocalized 'innf (imperative of the homonym 'nh “sing,”


4. For a brief discussion, see below, on Isa. 55:1-5, 10-13, at p. 53, n. 25.

5. For the proposal that the task of the prophet, ancient and modern, is to “evolve an alternative perception,” see Walter Brueggemann, The Prophetic Imagination (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).


7. Ibid., pp. 482-86.


9. For the necessity for exegesis to include “the full canonical context,” see Brevard Childs, Biblical Theology in Crisis (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), Part 2.

10. For a detailed examination of the strengths and weaknesses of lectionary preaching, and especially of the dangers posed to the integrity of the Old Testament as Scripture, see Lloyd R. Bailey, “The Lectionary in Critical Perspective,” Interpretation, 31 (1977), 139-53.

11. For a discussion of prophetic oracles from the standpoint of “prediction,” see J. J. M. Roberts, “A Christian Perspective on Prophetic Prediction,” Interpretation, 32 (1979), 240-53. He discusses texts under the following headings: already have come to pass; have not, and will never, come to pass; are yet to be fulfilled, and have the possibility of nonliteral “fulfillment.”

12. Despite the claims of some modern persons that the prophets of ancient Israel had “paranormal” abilities (e.g., Hal Lindsey speaks of “Ezekiel and ESP”), there is no evidence, in my opinion, that there was anything “paranormal” about them. Nor is there any scientific evidence, in my opinion and after considerable reading, that anyone in the present has “paranormal” abilities. See C. E. M. Hansel, ESP and Parapsychology: A Critical Re-examination (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1980), and especially Chaps. 8-11 concerning the research of J. B. Rhine of Duke University.


14. So The Interpreter’s Bible, I, 754.

15. See Best, From Text to Sermon, pp. 75-80.


17. For warnings against this interpretive tendency, see Leander Keck, The Bible in the Pulpit (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), pp. 100-105.


22. One should not assume, of course, that every passage in Scripture may be brought into the dialogue with every modern situation with equal ease, or even at all. But changing historical circumstances may bring the community back into dialogue with some texts which formerly seemed irrelevant.

24. My discussion assumes the existence of at least three, if not four or more, "Isaiahs," where those numbered II-IV may represent generations of disciples of the great prophet whose name has been given to the entire collection. The divisions, overly simplified, are as follows: I Isaiah, chapters 1-23 + 28-35 (with a later prose description in 36-39), ca. 743-700 B.C.; II Isaiah, chapters 40-55, ca. 540 B.C.; III Isaiah, chapters 56-66, ca. 530-480 B.C.; IV Isaiah, chapters 24-27, of less certain but possibly later date. Whatever one's opinion about this type of division, it is important to realize that it is a historical and literary problem, and not a theological one (i.e., it does not violate a claim which the Bible itself makes, or of any creed or council of the church, nor does it have any implications for questions of "inspiration"). For competent discussion, see the sections on Isaiah in IB, 1DB, and IDBS.

25. This approach, sometimes called "audience-criticism," is always a helpful one for the modern interpreter to ask. Even if the specific situation of the original audience (ancient Israel) was vastly different from the modern one (in synagogue or church), their attitudes and values may have much in common. And thus the "answer" in the text may speak to the same mind-set, across the generations. For helpful discussion, see Lawrence E. Toombs, "The Problematic of Preaching from the Old Testament," Interpretation, 23 (1969), 302-14.

26. This is not the same as distinguishing the "point" of a thought-unit from that of the literary context into which it has been placed (see the discussion of Zech. 9:9-13, Assumption D).


28. The Interpreter's Bible, V, 643.


30. In the lectionary used by Macleod, the New Testament reading is Matt. 14:13-21 (the multiplication of loaves and fishes). The linkage presumably in Isaiah invites the people to a banquet; Jesus provides for them. Macleod apparently has tried to read the prophet through the lens of the Gospel, and thus deduced a prior principle ("central thrust") in both. (On the lectionary context, see section IV.)

31. For a helpful treatment of the social, economic, and political factors which produced apocalypticism, see the article "Apocalypticism" in IDBS.

32. In recognition of this, lectionaries sometimes assign vv. 1-5 and vv. 10 ff. to different Sundays. Thus Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and COCU lectionaries assign the latter to the eighth Sunday after Pentecost and the former to the eleventh Sunday.

33. Some lectionaries (e.g., Lutheran and Roman Catholic) conclude the reading with v. 11 (in contrast to COCU and Seasons of the Gospel).

34. In accordance with the divisions outlined above in nn. 32, 33, other lectionaries link 55:1-5 with Matthew 14:13-31 ("the miracle of loaves and fishes") and 55:10ff. with Matthew 13:1-23. The reasons for the latter are obvious, but problematic (see above); the former is one of those superficial connections for which lectionaries are famous: in Isaiah, the people are invited to a banquet; while in the Gospel Jesus feeds the hungry.


36. For the interesting suggestion that these stories of the deity's "passing by" served as models for a ritual in the temple wherein a cultic emblem of some sort was literally carried by and symbolized the presence of the deity, see Gerhard von Rad, The Problem of the Hexateuch (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966), p. 290, n. 22.

37. For a general review, see "Kings, I and II," in IDB and IDBS; "Deuteronomic History" in IDBS.

38. For the various "meanings" which a text may have as the context is expanded, see 75.
Assumption D under the discussion of Zech. 9:9-13.

39. For these so-called "sons of the prophets," see II Kings 4:1, 38; 6:1; "Sons of the Prophets" in IDB.

40. See "Baal," "Canaanites" (sections 5-6), and "Agriculture" (section 7) in IDB.

41. See "theophany in the OT" in IDB.


43. The Interpreter's Bible, III, p. 161.

44. Ibid., pp. 162-163.


46. The Interpreter's Bible, III, pp. 164-166.

47. For detailed treatment, see Paul Hanson, The Dawn of Apocalyptic (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

48. The Interpreter's Bible, III, pp. 164-166.

49. James Smart, History and Theology in Second Isaiah (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), p. 229, speaks of this as "moving in the direction of the later legalistic system of Judaism in which the coming of God's salvation was made to depend upon the nation's keeping the law." He interprets the text to be saying that the people must "keep justice" in order that God's salvation may come. However, there are elements of uncertainty in the Hebrew text, both grammatically and structurally. The crucial word is ki (RSV, "for my salvation is near")." For detailed treatment, see Paul Hanson, The Dawn of Apocalyptic (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

50. Reginald Fuller, Preaching the New Lectionary, p. 237.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid. Fuller uses this term to characterize the point of view of the New Testament, not the modern churches, however.

53. One might compare their attitude, and the deity's response, with that of Elijah on Mt. Horeb in the text previously studied (I Kings 19:9-18).

54. Such extensions in meaning are to be undertaken with caution. For a problematic area, see under the discussion of I Kings 19:9-18, at II.A.1.

55. For a discussion of the various means whereby the ancient Yahwists coped with death, see Lloyd R. Bailey, Sr., Biblical Perspectives on Death (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979). Briefly, see Brueggemann, "Death, Theology of," in IDB.

56. See "Adoption" and "Levirate Law" in IDB.

57. See Stanley Bruce Frost, "The Memorial to the Childless Man," Interpretation, 26 (1972), 437-50, and especially pp. 445-46, where our text is discussed.
HEALING THROUGH SOLITUDE
AND COMMUNITY

FAITH CORNWALL

Christianity has highlighted solitude as a means of achieving insight even while it has emphasized the enrichment offered through community. The gospel portrayal of Jesus as a person who found it necessary at times to be alone in prayer is balanced and illuminated by the reverse picture of a man who enjoyed socializing with others. Alone during the forty days and nights preceding his active ministry, in what is described as the temptations, he was facing and dealing with elemental human tendencies common to us all. He struggled with these tendencies, integrated them, and brought them into a relationship of subservience to his divine nature. The writer of Matthew describes the result in picturesque language: “Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and ministered to him” (Matt. 4:11 RSV). Then, also, began the ministry of Jesus.

Elijah retreated to a cave, there to become acutely aware of the power of God and of God's leading, but only after having first been engulfed in his disillusionment and dilemma. As his inner horizon broadened he became aware of an anointing to be accomplished by him and of seven thousand faithful in Israel who had not bowed down to Baal. In returning to community he experienced the fulfillment of the promise of his solitude.

Solitude is needed for introspection and prayer, for sorting things out in one's mind, but without human encounter and interaction one may distort the experience. Jesus enjoined his followers to practice solitary prayer: “Pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:6). By the third century this came to be interpreted as a

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guide to monasticism. But solitary ascetics soon became aware of their need for one another and joined together in the cenobite, or common life, combining individual devotions and group reinforcement. For although there is within us that which is transcendent and accessible only through inward-looking, there is also within us that upon which we cannot look at great length except within the matrix of support from other human beings. We may be overpowered by resentments and fears unless we uncover them to the healing presence of caring others.

Sidney Jourard, the psychologist, went so far as to say that no one can come to know himself/herself except as an outcome of disclosure to another person. “When a person has been able to disclose himself utterly to another person, he learns how to increase his contact with his real self and he may then be better able to direct his destiny on the basis of knowledge of his real self.” Healthy individuals, he continued, are able to make themselves known “to at least one other significant human being.”

But we must make ourselves open to God as well. We cannot endure a sense of isolation from either persons or God. Not only this, the experience of being alone with God enriches human transactions. It breaks down barriers by establishing in the mind of the worshiper the awareness that at the deepest level we are all of the same cloth, that within every human being there is both the breath of the Spirit and the human nature, and that this is to be affirmed.

The earthquake, wind, and fire in which Elijah sought God, and the three temptations of Jesus, typify the trials each undergoes as we engage in introspection: the questions, the uncertainties, the shaky ground, the feeling of being blown this way and that. The experience is discomforting, but until we have heard out our doubts and inner conflicts, we are not really our own—or God’s.

The lectionary for this period emphasizes both facets of this truth: that we require a solitary experience with God, with all its comfort and pain, and that we fulfill and further this inner growth in community.

A young man returned to a psychiatric hospital for additional help. He was acutely ill, but when he saw me he recognized me
from a previous contact. Looking deeply into my eyes, he asked, “Will you come and get me?” He was asking me to meet him where he was in his mind and bring him back to himself. Our ministry to persons involves joining them in their world, as Christ joined us in ours. There we make community with them, and only when community is restored can the healing process take place.

In our own way we ask this question of one another: “Will you come and get me?” The two psychological needs of which Dr. William Glasser wrote are inherent in all: to have at least one other person who cares about us and for whom we care, and to feel that we are worthwhile to ourselves and others. The story of Joseph epitomizes the personal, inner struggle and the manifestation of its resolution in a restoration to community. It is inconceivable to assume that Joseph spent no troubled moments or wakeful nights asking the universal question—Why?—as recollections of his mistreatment by his brothers forced their way into his consciousness even after events had gone well for him. The intrusive memory of some past injustice reminds every human being of events she or he would prefer to forget. But forgetting is not the solution; resolution is. The fact that Joseph had done his homework was revealed in his forgiveness of his brothers, his willingness to offer good for evil, and his masterful assessment of the entire situation: “You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good [not just for my good, but for the sake of many]” (Gen. 50:20).

As it is with each of us in dealing with the issues of our life, so it is on a universal scale. We are empowered by the Spirit to resolve inner and outer conflict through responding individually and in community to the invitation to receive sustenance as freely given as if it were without price. Grace cannot be encompassed within similes, but Isaiah made every effort. And he made his point that mercy extended even to Israel’s outcasts, as it does to every hidden facet of the self. Can we really believe that thorn trees will be replaced by productive ones? And that within the heart of the universe and the hearts of men and women there is an undying song?

A woman I visited lay in a darkened hospital room unable to eat, her health declining days after surgery when she should
have been well enough to go home. She told of a quarrel she and a neighbor had had seven years before. They had exchanged angry words, and she had chided her neighbor, “You shouldn’t talk to me like that. I’m sick.” The neighbor had retorted, “I wouldn’t care if you died.” Those chafing words had rankled in her mind for seven years as each observed her new rule not to speak to the other.

We talked about forgiveness, and the patient resolved that as soon as she got home from the hospital, she would go to her neighbor, express her desire for a renewal of their friendship, and ask for forgiveness. The next day when I visited the hospital room, the window shades were open. The intravenous equipment had been removed. The patient had eaten her breakfast. Within a few days she was able to go home. A turn for the better had been experienced, first in her mind and heart, and then in her health. “Get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God; so turn, and live” (Ezek. 18:31b, 32).

Theology apart from empowerment to live, to become more fully integrated as religious beings, would be a futile exercise. As Frederick Buechner observed in *The Alphabet of Grace*:

Most theology, like most fiction, is essentially autobiography. Aquinas, Calvin, Barth, Tillich, working out their systems in their own ways and in their own language, are all telling us the stories of their lives, and if you press them far enough, even at their most cerebral and forbidding, you find an experience of flesh and blood, a human face smiling or frowning or weeping or covering its eyes before something that happened once. What happened once may be no more than a child falling sick . . . and yet it made . . . a difference which no theology can ever entirely convey or entirely conceal.

In working with the mentally ill, one finds how difficult it is for disturbed persons to believe they have a right to experience such grace, such an infiltration of the human by the divine. The forgiving presence of God in one’s life must be earned, they insist, and they have not earned it. They are more outspoken than we about what most of us deeply believe. When we are
faced with our suffering we ask: For which of my sins am I being punished? As if the suffering and the “punishment” were the end of the matter and not the doorway to grace. We know that we are less responsible in some areas than in others. Yet one is justly suspicious of persons who hate what they are so much that they convince themselves—and try to convince others—that they have a different identity. When we are in good mental health, we prefer to be ourselves even while we want to be different.

A patient had been referred to me because of her religious concerns. When I visited, she told me she wanted to find out who she was. I asked her who she thought she was, and she gave me a fictitious name. To my question, “Why do you want to be (the fictitious name)?” she replied, “Because then I would be out of the hospital and my family would be helping me.” I told her I knew a name that was hers: “Child of God.” She sighed, “It’s such a relief to talk with someone who knows who I am.” Before we finished our conversation, she told me her real name. In the context of relationship with someone who cared, she was able to be herself.

Maurice Friedman in his book Touchstones of Reality quotes Rabbi Zusya. “When I get to heaven, they will not ask me: ‘Why were you not Moses?’ but ‘Why were you not Zusya?’” And Friedman interprets, “We are called to become what we in our created uniqueness can become—not just to fulfill our social duty or realize our talent or potentialities, but to become the unique person we are called to be.” This uniqueness, he continues, is realized in our response to the world. Moses had his own creative response to make for his time and situation, and we have ours, as did each of the persons who figured in the Scripture passages to which we are relating.

Werner von Braun once revealed in a newspaper article that early in his life he envisioned sending rockets through the boundaries of earth’s gravity in order to enable mankind to make journeys to the moon and beyond. Although he disliked mathematics, he became a proficient mathematician in order to facilitate his dream. After one of his successes, he quoted what he termed the guiding theme of his creative life, a statement by
Jules Verne: "Anything one man can imagine other men can make real."

This rule is the obverse of the proverb, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ezek. 18:2b). Knowledge is cumulative; experience does teach. We have been given the responsibility of utilizing knowledge and realizing the potentials in human life. Although many individuals appear to get lost in the total group and its contributions, none does. The life and death of the "soul that sins" is the life and death of all who follow, as well as of those who are contemporary; so is the life and death of the person who makes a positive contribution.

If there is anything our scientific age has taught us, it is that the unraveling of mysteries seems to have no end. Heirs to the foundation of knowledge upon which we stand, we are at a high point, better able to take our direction for the future because we see so much more clearly where we have been. Admittedly, much that we see must be interpreted by people whose insights into the mysteries of the material universe are greater than our own. Nevertheless, we benefit.

But we are in a sensitive if not crucial era in history, as well. Inheriting the good deeds and wisdoms of our predecessors and contemporaries, we also inherit in our culture their sins and the results of our own. It is within the self we are—that culture has made us—that we must find our transcendence and our healing. We cannot be lifted out of our context without losing identity. But through dealing responsibly with who we are, and where we are (as both humans and children of God, capable of change), we can experience a new covenant.

We exercise judgment more actively in critical situations simply because we are forced to. When we are caught in a dilemma, we have to take a closer look, make distinctions, take sides within ourselves and with others. For this reason, the critical times of our lives can be the most productive—and this critical era in the world's history offers unparalleled hope.

Charles V. Gerkin points out that we people of the world were just on the verge of realizing expansive aspirations through scientific developments when we looked at the blue-white sphere in space—our earth as photographed from the moon—
and became acutely aware of the limitedness of all that science has to work with in providing for our needs and our expanding economic life-style, "captured by the vision of human potential for mastery of one after another of the contingencies that impinge on the length and quality of human life, yet having to come to terms with our finitude and the vulnerability that finitude entails." "Technological achievement," he remarks, "runs head on into ecological limitations."

Had our generation been set in time a century or so back, we would have accepted our limitations more graciously, relegating ultimate meaning to a life beyond. But society has become too complex for us to slip back easily into a more slow-moving, more laborious-producing, in some ways less fulfilling, way of life; so we hear the voice of disillusionment and the prophecy of ultimate threat to the human race. Somewhere along the line, in our absorption with material benefits, we have dimmed our ability to think, feel, and hope in terms of a divine plan and ultimate meaning, a meaning that can be depended upon "though the earth should change" (Ps. 46:2a).

Gerkin asks if modern persons can be helped toward a renewed faith in God's providence while at the same time they are being assisted in opening themselves to the changes thrust upon them by their period of crisis in transition. He answers his question by saying that we must indeed open ourselves "to the vulnerability of the unknown future, trusting in the power and care of God coming out of the change and contingency of the unknown." But hasn't this always been what was required of us? The props are different, but the scenario is the same!

We participate in the drama of our time when we determine to turn and live. And everyone must proceed at his or her own pace. This Joseph allowed his brothers to do, and the result was a successful restoration to relationship. A portion of our success as counselors will depend upon our sensitivity to the counselee's readiness; another portion will depend upon our ability to slow our pace and work within the other's frame of reference. This is the case even when we feel that our approach must be confrontive or directive; that is, confrontation and exhortation will fall on deaf ears unless they originate in empathy and understanding. Meaning, for each of us, is limited
to our capacity for perspective. As Seward Hiltner once observed, what “clicks” with us is what is not too threatening. The essential self-disclosure that our counselees must engage in with us is possible only if they feel that, if they allow themselves to be known, they will still be valued as persons of worth, just as they are. To quote Dr. Don Browning’s recent article in Pastoral Psychology, “every specific attitude of therapeutic acceptance presupposed a deeper judgment about the ultimate acceptability of the person, not just to the therapist, but to some ultimate ground which bestows all value and assigns all acceptability.”

As Joseph must have done, then, we must believe in the innate ability of all persons to work out their own salvation and destiny. This stance may induce anxiety in the pastor and at times in the parishioner, but to claim authority to govern another’s destiny for him or her will be more discomfiting, fostering a dependence that may awaken aspects of our own inner turmoil with which we may not be ready to deal.

A psychiatrist told the story of his five-year-old son, who had recently become big brother to the new addition to the family. The boy stood looking into the baby’s crib and solemnly asked, “How do you feel about yourself?” Growing up with an awareness of the importance of being able to ask this question, both of himself and others, was this boy’s good fortune. An honest reply to the question can lead to openness, self-confrontation, and the acceptance of one’s humanity. Only through these avenues can we maintain integrity and self-esteem.

“The pastor,” writes Carroll Wise, “is called upon to accept his basic humanity and to experience within himself the truth that ultimately he stands in the same need as others, and that he has the same potential for sin and illness as do all others.” Henri Nouwen put it even more pointedly: “Forgiveness is only real for him who has discovered the weakness of his friends and the sins of his enemy in his own heart and is willing to call every human being his brother.”

One obstacle to this degree of straightforwardness, Wise continues, is our narcissism, or love of self. The counseling pastor is “called upon to help people understand that he does not cure them, nor do they cure themselves, but that healing comes through elements within themselves which they did not
create, but before which they need to stand in reverence and obedience." And we, participating in and witnessing this movement toward wholeness, stand by in awe. "Am I in the place of God?" Joseph asked. Unwilling to see himself as messianic, he was ready to be God’s instrument.

We may need to regain the vision that enables us to believe that God’s ways and God’s thoughts are higher than ours, and that the word of the Creator shall accomplish the purpose to which it has been sent in the world and in our lives. The J. B. Phillips translation of I Peter 5:7 is reassuring: "You can throw the whole weight of your anxieties upon him, for you are his personal concern."

The lowly King who stoops to fight the battles of Israel is also with us. There may be no dramatic finale such as that envisioned by Zechariah for Zion, no total solution to the enigmas of our humanity, but there will be peace and joy in the process and a sense of God’s fighting our battles with us as we face God one-to-one within the fellowship of community.

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 25.
11. Wise, p. 44.
HONESTY IN THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
Reviews by W. Royce Clark


Arthur Schopenhauer concluded the preface to his first edition of The World as Will and Representation somewhat defensively but profoundly, insisting that "life is short and truth works far and lives long: let us speak the truth." For original thinkers or those who do not simply ape others' ideas, this honesty, he himself knew, will not always bring pleasantries in life. The original thinker nevertheless feels obligated to express the truth. It is surely with this conviction—that life is short and truth lives long—that these recent works of Küng, Rahner, and Schillebeeckx have been released after years of fruitful experience, dedication, and scholarship. All three of these books, in fact, can be analyzed under this very rubric of theological honesty without artificially imposing something foreign on them.

For Küng, obviously the most central question that needs honest investigation today is whether there is a really anything unique about being a Christian. Is there actually any compelling reason why one should be a Christian (1)? To answer this question honestly means to assess candidly the alternatives to Christianity as well as the inherent problems of ascertaining the essence of Christianity. But even an honest theology is not the goal of Küng. All the well-intended research and talk about God and Christ and the implications of being Christian
are superfluous without what Kung considers to be unique—Christian social and humanistic actions (554-602, 115). As he says, "The ultimate criterion of a person's Christian spirit is not theory but practice: not how he thinks of teachings, dogmas, interpretations, but how he acts in ordinary life" (380). Christian action is the ultimate criterion for Kung because of the emphasis he gives to the exemplary nature of Jesus in his radically humanistic activity on God's behalf.

It is not an accident that two-thirds of Kung's book deals with christology since "being a Christian" necessarily means for him trusting God who has revealed his human face definitively in Jesus as the Christ (446). As he insists, Christianity means the "activation of a dangerous and liberating memory" (121), and a life of faith toward God as the ultimate meaning for human history. Even though God's kingdom has yet to come, it has been embodied in the spirit of Jesus, particularly as he stood against ideology, exploitation, and idolatrous religious legalism. Jesus embraced in his life and dying the disenfranchised and the sinners, who ultimately included even the self-righteous who rejected him.

Jesus the Christ distinguishes Christianity from other religions. Kung repeatedly emphasizes that even here the unique mark is not simply that Jesus was a historical person whose life can be verified to some degree, but rather he is one whose ultimate crucifixion corresponded completely with his teachings of service to his fellow humans, and whose resurrection validated his indirect claims of being the advocate of God. Had there been no resurrection, Jesus would rightfully have been remembered as a heretic and blasphemer and there would have been nothing unique about his claims. Had there been no crucifixion, that is, if he had refused to die for the beliefs he had, then a resurrection would have been inconsequential because of his compromise.

Through rigorous historical criticism, Kung attempts to uncover who this Jesus was and what he taught. Kung is convinced that Jesus' resurrection proved him "right." What the most authentic words and actions of Jesus show is that he is a champion for human freedom and dignity (382), he is neither of the establishment nor is he a political revolutionary, and he certainly is not a retreating "religious" person or a Pharisaic compromiser (176-213). Jesus points his audience beyond every human institution to the kingdom of God itself. Influenced by apocalyptic ideas, he insists that this kingdom is imminent, is even breaking in by his own actions and love. He espouses no social reform program per se and usually does not give detailed instructions on how to prepare for the kingdom. Rather he offers general, unconditional
demands that the kingdom might make upon his hearers, or he gives illustrations of the significance of the kingdom.

Of course the kingdom did not come as expected. It could even be said that Jesus made a cosmic miscalculation. Certainly he did not intend to establish a church, so one cannot honestly slip the church into the slot intended for the kingdom (214-26). But in Jesus' understanding of the kingdom there is a tension between the "already" and the "not yet," which points to the fact that for him God’s transcendence is the ever-present eschatological demand upon persons as they constantly confront the "God before us" (224).

Ultimately, Jesus is crucified, particularly for his stand against the hypocrisies in Judaism. It is not simply the Jewish people who seek his death, but more accurately only the Jewish hierarchy, or more precisely still, it is the Jewish law itself which finally secures Jesus' death, according to Kung (339). Christianity, however, does not properly begin until Easter transforms and makes intelligible Jesus' claims, association, and even his death.

Unlike events such as Jesus' death, his resurrection cannot be verified by historical evidence or method since it is an event of God, as Kung describes it. But, received by faith, the resurrection holds a convincing, "vocational" power on any who can accept the truth that even in suffering and death God does not recede from humanity, but that in those extreme moments one finds ultimate meaning, love, and new life (358, 377, 434). This new life is made possible as one receives the Creator-Redeemer God in Jesus Christ, the one who preserves continuity through the great discontinuity of cross and resurrection, and the one who grants freedom to live even in the midst of death. The cross serves not merely as an example or an ethical model, but rather is itself the "ground, strength, and norm of the Christian faith" (410).

The writings of Paul, which are the earliest extant formulations of Christianity's essence, show that he only radicalized Jesus' position on the law in the light of Jesus' death. He certainly did not start a new religion, but rather simply defended the cause of Jesus as the Christ in considerably different situations than had been encountered by Jesus himself (399-410).

If Kung's long section on christology establishes the uniqueness and norm of the Christian religion, the first and last sections of the book illustrate the most problematical challenges to that norm in our modern world: general humanism, non-Christian religions, and the Christian church itself. Whether present in its historical, technological, evolutionary ideology or in its socio-political revolutionary form, general humanism has tended in the past to hold out a more realistic
and humanistic hope for people. Because of the general shrinking of
our world through communication and other facts of modern life, the
non-Christian religions have begun to challenge the narrow, exclusi-

tivistic claims and methods of Christianity. By its own structural

presumptuousness, dogmatic intolerance, and general social-ethical

irresponsibility, the Christian church itself has lost credibility in the
eyes of people today.

The whole scene is not over, however, and Künig shows confidence
that the Christian faith will not dissipate into oblivion but will
re-establish itself for the following reasons. First, both technological-
evolutionary and socio-revolutionary ideologies are being questioned
in the modern world (especially by those without vested interests) as to
whether they really are capable of yielding the humanistic goals they
have at best propagated genuinely and at worst mouthed as clichés.
Second, the non-Christian religions, though salvation may be attained
in them, nevertheless lack the uniquely humanistic element contained
in the Christian faith. That is, they do not have as their basic originating
historical norm an event which is radically humanistic and simul­tan­


eously radically self-critical. They tend toward ideology or the idolatry
of equating their finite aspects, including conditioned historical form,
with the Infinite. On the other hand, Jesus' sacrifice is to Künig, as it
was to Tillich, a sacrifice of finite existence that points to that which is
truly ultimate. Third, Künig is convinced that humanity seems
incapable of becoming totally nonreligious. The need for self-tran-
scendence is felt today as intensely as ever, not simply in a

rational-moral form such as Kant's postulating "God" for the sake of
morality, but in the sense the whole person has this need to find
ultimate meaning, value, and being. The possibility of the "uncertain
reality" encountered or anticipated by all people drives each individual
to make a decision either for or against ultimate meaning. It is precisely
at this point that within a modern, scientific, and historical orientation,
Christian theology must attempt to sketch the basic offerings of the
Christian faith as an option to meaninglessness.

This brings us finally to Künig's method. Using the same terminology
as Pannenberg (he calls it the method "from below" rather than "from
above"), Künig works with historical data in the ascertaining of the

essence of the Christian faith. The other facet of the "from below"
method is to consider the total present self-understanding of modern
cultures. So Künig's method is one of "correlation," as was Tillich's, a
method in which one attempts to prejudge neither the evidence for the
Christian claims nor the evidence for the legitimacy of modern human
self-understanding. Rather, by letting each speak for itself, one is
honestly opening up the question of whether or not it makes sense to be a Christian today.

Küng’s familiarity with and utilization of historical-critical methods are impressive. Fortunately, though unlike Pannenberg’s christology “from below,” Küng acknowledges that historical criticism itself cannot verify Christ’s resurrection. For Küng the New Testament is not objectified revelation in the Barthian or fundamentalist sense, but rather the New Testament is something that can become revelation (more like Barth’s earlier, dialectical position). Nevertheless, the traditions in the New Testament that are usually given normative status by Küng are those ascertained as the most original or the earliest in time.

Because of his honest historical criticism and preference for the oldest or most authentic early traditions in Christianity, Küng often feels compelled to insist on a radically new, perhaps original, understanding of doctrines which have strayed far afield from their origins. Although he acknowledges the strengths and weaknesses of narrative, mythical, and abstract talk of God, he finds some dogmas too involved with myth, legends, later ecclesial trappings, and sheer historical accidents. Severe criticism is applied to such things as the basic juridical concept of church structure that has been revived in post-Vatican II years, doctrines such as Christ’s descent into hell, his virgin birth, the immaculate conception, the bodily ascension of Mary, etc. Further, Küng’s insistence that theology today must take for granted the scientific world understanding, necessitates a new approach to miracle stories in Scripture and tradition, namely, the abandonment of the view that God interferes in nature immediately. Finally, such a scientific approach, especially with the New Testament as its norm, demands the immediate retraction of Rome’s unjustifiable, inhuman, or anachronistic positions on celibacy, birth control, etc. (526-27).

So Küng continually insists that the norm for Christianity is not some medieval concept of “natural law,” not some objectified revelation in a book whose historical claims are to be taken without investigation, not some “apostolic succession” whose sole concern is succession of leadership rather than of the church as a whole, and certainly not some dogma or tradition whose ancient form is to become the uniform standard for all future Christians. The norm remains the living person, Jesus the Christ, understood in various ways from the beginning of Christianity. Though unverifiable in his risen form (just as God is unverifiable by pure reason), Jesus is the gift of God to the whole person who in openness of spirit chooses ultimate meaning. The norm
empowers the believer today to move toward a more radical humanism, a humanism beyond all ideology, a humanism that encourages plurality in understanding and action rather than insisting upon absolute uniformity (478). In this honest assessment of what Christianity should be, it does make sense to be a Christian if one is at all sensitive to meaning, life, and the problems and needs of modern society.

Kant once wrote that an official of the church had the obligation, when speaking on behalf of the church as its representative, to do so accurately rather than give one's own views. But when expressing one's individual views as a scholar, one was to be honest to oneself. As problematical as this schema is, Kung seems to have accomplished it. Although certain critiques of the church could be taken as cynical or bitter, what is amazing is that one could still represent the church's position as honestly and enthusiastically as he does after what he has experienced over the years. He insists that he is staying in the church, and he admonishes his readers to do the same, for the kingdom's sake.

With Kung's concern for original, essential, honest, and meaningful Christianity, Protestantism is not an acceptable alternative to his present plight, an obvious fact that may disappoint some Protestant readers. In the best sense of the word, Kung is attempting to transcend the destructive and anachronistic dichotomies of Protestant/Catholic or liberal ("progressive")/conservative. His primary concern is "being a Christian," and whether or not one agrees with all of his positions or judgments, one must still be impressed by his ruthless honesty, fairness, and rigorous scholarship.

Schillebeeckx begins with a different question than Kung, but shares the same basic concern. That is, most of the material in his book gives a very detailed investigation of the development of and original aspects of the earliest Christian understandings and christologies. Kung is not this involved in such matters of tradition and redaction history. Yet both are honestly determined to establish, in the face of modern criticism and with the tools of modern scholarship, what the Christian confession is all about—or at least to open up one or more possible ways in which it can become credibly understood in the present.

A century and a half ago, Friedrich Schleiermacher profoundly grounded his christology by equating Christ's dignity with his activity:

The peculiar activity and the exclusive dignity of the Redeemer imply each other, and are inseparably one in the self-consciousness of believers . . . Thus the approximation to blessedness, out of the state of misery, cannot be explained as a fact mediated through Jesus, be reference to either of these elements without the other. It follows, therefore, that they must be most
intimately related and mutually determined. So that it is vain to attribute to the Redeemer a higher dignity than the activity at the same time ascribed to Him demands, since nothing is explained by this surplus of dignity.3

Nothing describes more succinctly the direction of Schillebeeckx's Jesus than this quotation from Schleiermacher. Further, nothing more aptly focuses on the basic honesty of method employed by Schillebeeckx in his insightful, cautious, scholarly work. Christian faith, for Schillebeeckx, must be founded upon the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, upon a trusting, intelligent assessment of his life, message, and fate. When one moves behind the later christological additions, honest and careful examination of the earliest models by which the Christian community understood Jesus' significance reveals a positive connection between what Jesus was "for them" and the historical Jesus.

To follow Schillebeeckx's proposed method means that one does not begin a christology with the assumptions of Nicea and Chalcedon or with a "one-sided" incarnational christology (571). These great christological formulations, though legitimate and necessary in their own time, today all too often only serve as barriers to non-Christians (671). They are utilized by many Christians as a justification or basis for believing all kinds of "supernatural 'hocus-pocus' " (649) about Jesus that defies both historical verification and/or scientific understanding of the world in which we live.

On the other hand, Schillebeeckx's approach will not allow the negative, positivistic influences of Enlightenment thought to reduce that which is a priori historically possible to certain manageable and predictable dimensions (585-94). The Christian faith has always consisted of both the historical fact of Jesus, and the willing reception and confession of his significance. The latter is not reducible to the former, nor vice versa. In order to make a fair and honest assessment of the Christian religion, however, one must attempt to discern as precisely as possible the historical facts for the case of Jesus and the rise of early christology. But beyond the determination of these historical facts, Schillebeeckx insists that the reader must become aware of the "intention" behind the stories and the assigning of certain models to Jesus. As one does open up to this, the christological development will appear either credible or unjustified, though in neither case will it be proven or disproven by the historical data alone.

More specifically, one will discover certain historical "clues" (34) in examining the earliest Christian creeds and models (i.e., those predating not only the finished Gospels as we have them, but even the
various traditions embedded in Q, pre-Marcan material, etc.) that point to who this Jesus actually was and what he did. Essentially, for Schillebeeckx, it turns out that Jesus was not apocalyptically oriented, but was an (the) eschatological prophet or messenger whose parables, and whose criticism of the disparity between Jewish religious theory and practice, together with his "miracles," "messianic actions" (e.g., the alleged cleansing of the temple), and especially his death on the cross, all pointed to his demand for metanoia or conversion in light of the imminent "rule of God." Quite differently from John the Baptist, Jesus' life and message constituted good news—good news of the human face of God. His resurrection, a vindication of this message and life, intended to show that God, whose kingdom Jesus announced, is present in human suffering, even in death, and gives a future to those who otherwise have been deprived of a future. The eschatological messenger eventually displaces the Torah as a "light to the nations" or the true way of God (274-82).

This resurrection of Jesus was a historical event involving Jesus and his disciples after his death. Ideas of bodily resuscitation, or emphases on the empty tomb or the appearances of the risen Lord, are unfruitful in trying to ascertain what the event actually involved. The resurrection was a disclosure situation, i.e., Jesus' actual post-death conversion of his disciples. Now, as Jesus reassembles them after the crushing experience of his crucifixion, for the first time they can be called "Christians" (358, 378, 396). These aspects of Jesus' resurrection can be historically ascertained although these disciples' assessment of Jesus cannot be judged nor can the content of the reality they experienced.

But for Schillebeeckx this is no problem. Jesus' primary legacy was after all a movement, the church, itself a resurrection reality living by faith. So historical research provides the framework in which a decision is ultimately made, or in which one is faced with a choice of accepting, as a gift of God, the reality of an open future and freedom from a now-forgiven past. This choice itself is not guaranteed by historical verification, for Schillebeeckx insists that everything in history is to a degree embedded in ambiguity. To choose to accept life as a gift of God, however, is not rationally inferior to choosing to understand human history as having some sense or reason behind it, rather than being nonsensical. These are choices made by faith, value choices in which one's whole orientation to life is determined, and such is the choice to embrace Jesus. Schillebeeckx admits that "the assessment of a person qua person cannot be a matter of scientific and theoretical analysis," yet "anybody willing to venture on it can—
now—listen to the Jesus story in such a way as to recognize in it the parable of God himself and so too the paradigm of the human character of our being-as-men: a new, unprecedented possibility of existence, thanks to the God whose concern is with man’’ (650, 619).

Schillebeeckx emphasizes especially how people respond to suffering. Within the general suffering and alienation that is characteristic of human life, he believes that anyone who either reaches out in hope for a better future or even criticizes or deplores the suffering itself, shows that implicit within such action or sentiment is the assumption of what being human should entail. Therefore the Christian choice or acceptance of the good news, and its consequent responsibility, is not any less credible than any posture of humanistic hope, since none of these options can be verified by historical data. They are only transcendentally verifiable.

Schillebeeckx shows how Christian hope differs from that of a humanist or utopian in three ways. First, the Christian’s connection with the future is not built upon merely an idea but upon a real person, Jesus the Christ, whose “Abba experience” gives the believer substantial hope. Second, the notion of what it is to be human is not definitively established or historically circumscribed in the Christian option, whereas in humanistic options its content becomes dogmatic, eventually obsolete, or inadequate. Third, hope for the future elicits from the Christian not just an abstract ethic and a moral life, but also religion in the best sense as worship of and a relation with the Transcendent.

One of the most difficult problems I have with this first assumption (above) is precisely the fact that it is an assumption. Kant and Strauss long ago not only raised significant objections against an alleged superiority of person over idea, but they also made us particularly aware of the hermeneutical problems in giving historical embodiment to our ethical ideal. This is precisely what forces Schillebeeckx to defend Jesus from being apocalyptically conditioned. Although he admits Jesus predicted the imminent kingdom of God, he is able to save Jesus from significant miscalculation by emphasizing that Jesus really intended only the “rule of God” when he preached the “kingdom of God.” But even after Schillebeeckx has neutralized the historical factors in Jesus’ makeup, he still has not solved the problem of the delayed Parousia, since even the imminent “rule of God” did not come as expected. So it is not really clear how a person gives us more genuine hope for the future than ideas.

Another problem in Schillebeeckx’s method is that quite often after he has conceded that a certain passage may not be an authentic saying
of Jesus but rather reflects a later christology, he will nevertheless suggest that it is still useful in reconstructing a total picture since it cannot entirely be dismissed. That is, his "clues" often seem to be stretched a long way; sort of a piling together of many inferior evidences which taken together as a whole, he feels, gives a consistent and significant witness. One might also wish that the author was a bit less defensive about the historicism he feels resulted from the Enlightenment. Yet overall, this exercise in "theological exegesis," as he calls it (39), is long overdue and in this form presents a very credible case for Jesus as the Christ.

The author shows tremendous familiarity with form-, redaction-, and tradition-criticism. He is also convinced that although we cannot possess that ancient "narrative innocence" of the first disciples, we need not relegate narrative to the trash bin. He suggests a "second innocence" which admits the benefits and problems with both narrative and abstraction (77-80). Of the various criteria Schillebeeckx utilizes to ascertain what is most likely the original Jesus, he places greatest weight on the principle of "dual irreducibility" and especially the principle of "consistency." If the latter principle, as I have already suggested, sometimes causes Schillebeeckx to find "clues" which may be dubious, it nevertheless fits well his understanding that an assessment of a person’s life must involve that whole life and fate, and this means for Jesus a consideration of his crucifixion and resurrection, events which for Schillebeeckx make many things intelligible within the earliest traditions.

Nevertheless, Schillebeeckx is so honest in attempting to keep Jesus’ person and activity equal, so as not to ascribe unwarranted dignity to Jesus, that much of the book is bound to please Catholic and Protestant readers alike. The burden lies upon those who disagree with him to give more historically verifiable explanations overall rather than simply fault him on isolated passages. If Christianity is to be credible to non-Christians or to have any relevance in the modern world, what Schillebeeckx attempts in this "theological exegesis" is certainly a necessity, and he must be commended for the gargantuan task involved.

Just as Schillebeeckx subtitled his work "an experiment," Rahner’s Foundations is referred to as an “experiment” (1). It is an experiment because rather than confine himself to some narrow theological area of specialization or relate his ideas only to the sophisticated theologian, Rahner attempts to present an overall view of the Christian essentials. In the process, he calls attention to the difficult question of the
“insurmountable difference between the original Christian actualization of existence and reflection upon it” (2). What this means for Rahner is complete honesty regarding the most difficult questions that Christianity encounters in the modern world. More specifically, an honest inquiry is made into the historical origins of the Christian religion and the modern mentality which appears not only to lack the assumption of the general legitimacy of the Christian religion, but even more, sees any historical religion as a mere human creation and finds no necessity to transcend this real world (5, 13, 256).

Rahner has always shown a strong attachment to the dogmatic or traditional teachings of the church while at the same time pointing out their inherent problems. The same is true of Foundations, and he attempts resolution of the problems through developing his eclectic, existential ontology. As usual, one can hear unique blends of such disparate voices as Augustine, Blondel, Aquinas, Schleiermacher, Paul, Vatican I and II, and Tillich. Yet in the long run, most of the dogma is not rejected but simply reinterpreted to a degree.

This mediating method, which correlates or juxtaposes an elaborated a priori ontology with a historically determined Christian tradition, comes especially to the foreground as Rahner discusses his christological method. He is unwilling to concentrate simply on the historical data as if that alone were sufficient, though he admits that an “incarnational” or “descending” christology (“from above”) should not be the beginning point but the end result of christological reflection. Unlike Küng, however, he insists that since the revelation of Christ has occurred and has been reflected in thought, since it is a part of the structure of being, it is also quite legitimate to work with the “above” approach, or better yet, to let the two condition and correct each other.

Almost exactly the first half of Foundations lays precisely that—foundations. That is, Rahner outlines a transcendental anthropology that is necessary for both the historical plane to be the credible bearer of God himself, and for the Word to be heard, understood, and believed by humans. He does this by abbreviating theses of many of his earlier works. Throughout his book, he insists that salvation is found by both Christians and non-Christians, reflective people and totally non-reflective people, in the acceptance of the immanent gift of God’s closeness, forgiveness, and life. God is the “holy mystery” that lies beyond all objectification, but which can only be categorically or thematically known through the tangible, historical, relative, or finite.

Since salvation can be unthematic or not conceptually recognized by the majority of people, salvation and knowledge are not to be equated,
Rahner insists. He avers that the grace of God has always been accessible to everyone, even ontologically prior to their sin and guilt.

History is the bearer of the transcendentality of God, and humans participate in this transcendentality to the degree that they have being. Therefore, all humans participate in God's "saving history," which is not a suprahistory but is the intrinsic self-communication of the ground or mystery of being to all particular beings. As unconditioned, God is not forced to become other than transcendent or unlimited, but God chooses to do so, and this is what the Incarnation is: the definitive, irrevocable offer of God himself.

The inner logic of what Rahner calls his transcendental christology is supplied from the prior experience or revelation of Jesus as the Christ in history. Rahner would insist, against Hegel's method, that there is nothing about the structure of being or of God ("holy mystery") that demands that it take on finitude or become other than itself. This is simply the grace of God. But conversely, he feels that there is no sufficient reason to deny this possibility of God's becoming other than itself through the Incarnation. And that being the case, he has surmounted what he considers the primary objection against Christianity today, viz., the insistence that it is inconceivable or inappropriate to think that the Infinite must or could take on a historical form while still retaining the status of the Infinite (82-83, 234).

What remains, then, in the last half of the book is Rahner's attempt to show not only that in principle the Incarnation was possible, but that in fact it took place (229), and what the implications of that event are. This involves dealing with historical data, but even more than this, it necessitates establishing a logical scheme for evaluating both the data and its interpretation, a scheme informed from the ontology already outlined. This means analyzing the relation between faith and knowledge, the role of commitment, the difference between "grounds" and the "object" of faith, the limitations of historical knowledge, etc. "Fundamental theology" is necessary to Rahner only to supply two things, viz., to make historically credible the fact that Jesus regarded himself as the eschatological prophet, as the "absolute and definitive savior," and to show through the resurrection which vindicates him (246) that this claim itself is credible. But the latter, he admits, we can evaluate only "from the perspective of our transcendental experience in grace of the absolute self-communication of the holy God" (246). Similarly, he points out that "salvation history" does not have to be historical (historisch), that is, "it does not have to
make and does not make the claim that it is also accessible to a knowledge which is not interested in faith, and in this sense is merely neutral and profane historical knowledge” (241).

This position is Rahner's attempt not to fall victim to the Scylla and Charybdis traps regarding Jesus' resurrection. That is, he is trying to avoid Bultmann's emphasis upon the decision of faith which minimizes the necessity of a post-death happening to Jesus himself. He is also attempting to avoid the opposite position of Pannenberg, who sees such inherent significance within the historical evidence for the resurrection that it all but eliminates the subjectivity of personal faith, leaving totally unexplained why anyone could have rejected the testimony about Jesus. If Rahner does avoid these extremes, he does so by his already established ontology, whereby one's decision to be the person he or she is, is a transcendental decision that remains unthematic but is mediated through categorical knowledge. The same "intrinsicism" helps Rahner also avoid pitfalls in manifold other areas. That is, given the relation of God and humans that he establishes in this fashion, God is never to be identified as one who "breaks into history" or violates the laws of nature with miracles. Similarly, other problems are avoided in areas dealing with the inspiration of Scripture, the plight of non-Christians who have never heard the explicit Christian message, the essence of the sacraments, salvation history, and even the "new" Marian dogmas. Not that his explanations of these will satisfy all his readers, but on the other hand, as with his basic ontology (elaborated in much more detail in his *Theological Investigations* and other works), it will at least serve here in the capacity of giving serious Christians an option for understanding their faith in the introductory way.

Finally, sections of Rahner's book dealing with the church reveal how far removed he is from both Küng and Schillebeeckx in his confidence that he can trace so much of the church's mission, constitution, etc., directly back to Jesus. Here his study needs to be more informed from "fundamental theology," as he calls it, or from Schillebeeckx's "theological exegesis" so it can avoid glaring errors of assigning views to Jesus that were obviously from Luke or other evangelists.

Küng's book has already been followed by his even longer work, *The Question of God*, and Schillebeeckx's Jesus has been succeeded by a more lengthy *Christ*, which suggests that they feel that there is much that must be said in our day. These three scholars are concerned to close the gap between the church and scholarship and simultaneously to present the Christian faith as a valid life-style. Such a task is not easy,
but their honesty and diligence deserves our attention and gratitude. As men who evidently have experienced the power of the “holy mystery” to the degree that the Infinite remains distinguishable from every finite thing and institution, they have found that the grace that answers even the most rigorous questions is that which points beyond all questions to itself. For a church that is able to understand itself as God’s means to an end, rather than an end in itself, such honest scholarship can only be a blessing in the long run.

NOTES

SPIRITUALITY AS EMBODIED PRAYER:
MORE SIGNS OF LIFE
Reviews by Don E. Saliers


A close friend and colleague, writing in response to a proposal on spirituality in parish ministry, urged me on with the remark that there is an almost desperate need of ministers to be met.

I hear from so many who say they are spent, worn out, and have lost track of whatever it was they meant to embody. Worries about losing social relevance by advocating a contemplative posture would never cross their minds—
they're too busy. What they need, out on the periphery of committee meetings and hospital calls and conflicting demands, is some map back to the Center. To help the minister become 'a sign of living prayer' is to order everything else he or she does in ministry.

Her apt response evoked two themes that reawakened in me as I pondered the books before us: "what we are meant to embody," and "a map back to the Center."

We are in the midst of a period of quickening that the church experiences from time to time. Recent years have witnessed a remarkable new concern with prayer and spirituality among laity and clergy in Roman Catholic and Protestant circles alike. The very term spirituality has become popular, and perhaps already a bit abused. Theological seminaries are turning attention toward questions of spiritual formation with renewed concern. As the opening chapter of Kenneth Leech's Soul Friend on spirituality in the present climate makes clear, the most vigorous and many-faceted search for a way to live spiritually often takes place outside the traditional Christian church structures.

Yet surely this new concern, whether ecclesial or cultural, has an air of ambiguity about it. New religious enthusiasms in a time of social disruption and uncertainty give the impression of being the latest "fashion" in American life. Indeed, much is being written about the escape from social mission to individualistic pietism, whether or not among the Moral Majority. Such concern can be seen as a function of the "new narcissism," as Christopher Lasch and others have called it, in the culture at large. It is precisely at such times that we need to be reminded of other periods of spiritual quickening, and to focus again on the deeper strands of Christian tradition that may give us some bearings.

For these reasons it is with considerable interest that we greet new biographies of Francis of Assisi and Thomas Merton. Though separated by nearly eight centuries, each lived an extraordinary life of contemplation and prayer that propelled them to engage the world in their own time and place. These particular biographies, though markedly different in style and intent, alongside two introductions to Christian spirituality and a forceful little book by Catholic theologians Rahner and Metz on prayer, provide us with something of a "map back to the Center." First, the biographies.

In their revised edition of Thomas Merton, Cornelia and Irving

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Süssman have given us a remarkable narrative portrait of this most paradoxical "Trappist celebrity." Merton’s life, cut short in Bangkok in 1968, has already begun to influence a second generation of those seeking authentic contemporary spirituality, Christian and non-Christian alike. Urban Holmes’ book speaks of Merton as one of the few contemporary spiritual masters who “revealed the fundamental lie of all who think the mystical way is an escape from reality” (154). The Süssmans have written a popular introduction that reads like a compelling novel. Drawing upon Merton’s own writings and from extensive conversations with those who knew him best, their account engages, delights, and provokes reflection. John Howard Griffin, Merton’s official biographer, has lauded the book as “true to Merton.”

The strength of this biography resides in its vivid portraiture of Merton’s humanity and teeming sense of life. Clear contrasts emerge between his ambivalence and restlessness on the one hand, and his contemplative certainties on the other. His life evidences a recurrent air of surprise, from the youthful homelessness and dreams to be “a sailor, a rover of strange lands,” to that extraordinary rapture at dawn while walking in the Gethsemani woods near his hermitage to pray the Psalms.

There is that vivid encounter with the lady of the house in Scotland, where his ill father had left him for a season, who admonished him mercilessly that he “not sulk” but “run with the pack.” Merton observed later that the direction his soul was to take was determined that fourteenth summer, not to run with the pack, but to move toward beingness, toward the contemplative life. Strong continuities thus mark his life journey toward the monastic vocation and beyond, despite the appearance of many turning points and many moments of sudden illumination. We learn, for example, that “out of his espousal of ... Gandhi at age fifteen grew his passionate resolution to stand up for peace all his life” (38).

The Süssmans express on every page a profound admiration for Merton’s person and influence. This is at once a strength and a weakness of the book, for while we see the pattern of contemplative spirituality emerging and we marvel at this gifted man with such virtuosity and range, there are no searching questions put to the sources. We look to Holl’s biography of Francis for such deeper explorations. Yet, for all the celebration of Merton, we discern enough of his complexity and of the strenuous journey of prayer and spiritual growth to learn much about our own poverty of spirit.

Two aspects of Merton were especially intriguing to me. First, there are the specifically American themes. He was, in the Süssmans’ words,
"creating a spirituality that reflected the indigenous American theme of the lonely search by the lonely seeker in the midst of the lonely crowd of extroverts accumulating things," a type of spirituality that "had been heretofore solely the mode of the American poets and novelists" (114). In this sense Merton gave new depth to our own soil in which the seeds of contemplation may be sown.

The second intriguing aspect of Merton concerns the relation he drew between spirituality and eschatology. What gave this social conscience depth was not so much his literary imagination—though his talent for that is undeniable. Rather this depth is a function of his grasp of biblical understandings of the "last things." Thus his own life becomes an embodied sign of his teaching: "Biblical eschatology must not be confused with the vague and anxious eschatology of human foreboding" (129). Rather we are to be signs of hope and the kingdom yet to come, our lives on pilgrimage.

Adolf Holl's biography of Francis of Assisi is a more formidable volume and cannot be regarded as a popular introduction. An adequate review of the complexities in his approach to the material would involve something like a "quest for the historical Francis" discussion. Unlike Thomas Merton's life, Francis' life is accessible only through limited primary sources. Holl has waded through a welter of traditions, much hagiography, and clichés of piety to draw his portrait. This is no easy matter, and biographies of Francis have shown a tendency to reflect the categories and inclinations of the writer. Francis remains a kind of cipher for the interests we bring to him. Holl's work is no exception.

His point of view emerges quickly in the first chapter. We are to understand Francis' own spiritual struggle and his life of prayer in light of his own bourgeois "modern" ego. He emerges as surprisingly aware of the social-political circumstances of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Italy, and there is a far more radical quality of his life and way of Christian prayer than the usual picture of the simple, humble, poor Saint Francis with the birds would allow us to believe.

The title is telling: Francis is the "last Christian" precisely because he proceeded to live out an imitation of the Christ of the Gospels in a most literal manner. Holl opens up the gap between the pristine Franciscan ideal of absolute simplicity and poverty and the official position of the Roman Church, which had already capitulated to the new world of power, commerce, and capitalism.

Holl warns us at the outset that his aim in writing a historical study of Saint Francis is "to aid in the understanding of contemporary social conditions" and to reveal "what Francis the man was actually like" (5).
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But he also treats Francis as a prophetic challenge to an exhausted Christianity that has in our day, like the church in Francis’ own time, married the spirit of the age.

Francis’ spirituality is powerful as a social force in its single-minded rejection of the ownership of property. Yet, as Holl tells us, only two years after his canonization, “The wishes of the little poor man from Assisi had been decisively, definitively sabotaged.” Francis, the canonized saint, stood “condemned as a heretic for having chosen to model his life on Jesus the poor man, and his whole operation had to go underground” (220). The message for us is clear: we sense his presence within us today “as one of the repressed longings of our bourgeois existence, and as the memory of a debt that has never been paid” (220). Francis’ own utter rejection of property thus “contained the purest socio-political dynamite” (69).

Whether or not we agree with Holl’s own preachments, there is no doubt about his insight into the interior tensions at work in the spiritual journey of Francis of Assisi. His life of prayer and service transforms bitterness into sweetness—his ministry to beggars and lepers who embodied the suffering and tortured Jesus. Alongside this was Francis’ desire for absolute certainty in the Word of God. His revelatory experiences with Scripture thus form an indelible mark and provide preparation for the eventual literal stigmata of Christ before his death.

Although he stresses the social-political and the interior psychological aspect of Francis (“he needed spectators and he got them”), Holl sees the suffering humanity of Christ at the center of Francis’s life and thought. Francis was “the first to incarnate the genuine breakthrough . . . to humanity. Himself unclothed, Francis preached a naked Jesus on the cross, with no divine insignias of power and glory, a very human God, in whom the common people could recognize themselves without any trouble” (67). This is the most telling point of the book. It is his embodiment of the humanity of God in the suffering Jesus that links the life of Francis with Thomas Merton, and to the quest for an adequate contemporary spirituality. As we shall see, the theme of solidarity in our common humanity of suffering and hope is central to Rahner and Metz in The Courage to Pray.

The character of Assisi emerges as a fusion of extraordinary single-mindedness, even to the point of crazy and theatrical stubbornness, admixed with a deep yearning for tenderness and sweetness. With this complexity in mind we may better appreciate the humility and the simplicity in our dear saint Francis, who was neither a doormat nor a simpleton. This biography will disturb us, and it ought to do so.
The books by Urban Holmes and Kenneth Leech are both "introductions" to Christian spirituality, but are very different in style and aim. Holmes' *History* is much more a handbook or small dictionary than it is a short history. He warns us, fairly enough, that the book is a "compressed historical summary." He takes us through a highly schematic survey of figures and predominant images of Christian spirituality from the early church down through Martin Luther King, Jr., Simone Weil, and Thomas Merton. This will be a helpful secondary source and textbook for seminarians and other students of spirituality. It is not suitable as the only source, however, since it leaves too many issues and figures in a curious kind of abstraction.

Holmes' concern to introduce us to frontiers of the study of Christian spirituality is laudable. One senses much more in the mind of the author than can possibly be conveyed through categories such as apophatic/speculative, speculative/kataphatic, kataphatic/effective, and so on. His basic point is clear: there is in the history of spirituality a constantly shifting relationship between style of spirituality and the human institutions and social circumstances in which these styles emerge. The best illustration of this, however, is not through naming simple dominant images for a particular period (a superficial starting point at least), but precisely through biography of the sort we have entertained above. Despite the limitations of Holmes' interpretive scheme, which claims to be a phenomenology of sorts, he helps us discern comparisons and contrasts between spiritual masters of quite different ages.

Kenneth Leech's book, first published in England in 1977, and now with an introduction by Henri Nouwen, is a most impressive introduction to the history and practice of spiritual direction. *Soul Friend* shows a specific contemporary concern to integrate insight from pastoral counseling, depth psychology, and psychotherapy with resources available from the Christian past. For Leech, spiritual direction belongs to the very center of Christian ministry. The formation of Christian prayer and life is at the heart of the church's work. Spirituality in ministry, whether lay or clergy, and especially spiritual direction, must now, he contends, take on a sustained dialogue with pastoral counseling. Leech gives us a clear rationale and illuminating introductory resources for both theology and practice.

Spiritual direction is intimately related to the attainment of psychological well-being. This is why the disciplines of spiritual direction and psychotherapy share common concerns. Yet Leech never ignores the differences. Spiritual direction cannot be reduced to one-on-one pastoral counseling techniques. Rather, it has to do with
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the discernment of the work of the Holy Spirit at the most intimate and
the most public sectors of the Christian life. Unlike most pastoral
counseling as practiced in the churches today, spiritual direction takes
its bearing from the sacramental life. Only by exploring the
relationships between growth and spiritual insight and the sacramen­
tal mysteries of the Christian gospel can the authenticity of Christian
prayer be restored. As Leech points out, all great Christian teachers
and mystics insisted that any who seek spiritual growth must be
engaged in the sacramental life of the community. To use the language
of Wesley, spiritual direction requires the exercise of the means of
grace.

One of the weaknesses in the current resurgence of interest in
spirituality is the lack of grounding in the richness of Christian
tradition. Leech's book addresses this need directly. Chapter 4
presents an insightful summary of essential features of six major
traditions: Eastern Orthodoxy, monasticism, Counter-Reformation,
the fourteenth-century mystics, and the Puritan and the Holi­
ness/Pentecostal traditions. He suggests three major themes we must
rediscover: first, the "spiritual necessity of orthodoxy"; second, the
insistence on the incarnational principle that he somewhat mislead­
ingly calls the "materialistic basis of spirituality"; and third, the
conception of prayer as a process or a journey. By "orthodoxy" in this
context I take him to mean "right praise of God." This means, as I have
written elsewhere, the recovery of the principle of lex orandi, lex credendi
in both theology and practice.

Leech rightly argues against too narrow a view of contemplative
prayer. Like Merton, he urges that it is not esoteric or heroic prayer.
There must be room for questioning and struggle in our relationship
with God and the form our lives should take in the world.
Contemplative forms of prayer may be the most well-suited to
conditions of modern life.

The relevance of spiritual direction to issues of social justice and
ethics is discussed. His all-too brief final chapter addresses this matter
forthrightly, though not as substantively as I had hoped. In contending
that spiritual direction has a necessary social dimension, he cites
Merton and others in placing human prayer in the sphere of the
kingdom of God. All spiritual growth and insight, if it is to be
Christian, must be judged by a vision of the kingdom. "No spiritual
direction can be . . . adequate in Christian terms unless it is preparing
men and women for the struggle of love against . . . wickedness in the
structures of the fallen world and in the depths of the heart" (191). In
In this sense, "contemplation is the vital prerequisite for human liberation" (191).

In *The Courage to Pray*, Rahner and Metz focus their considerable theological talents on the theme of prayer as an act of solidarity with humanity, both the living and the dead. Rahner's immediate concern is with the justification and clarification of prayer to the saints, while Metz concentrates on relatedness of prayer to our contemporaries.

Metz opens our thinking upon a broad horizon of history, claiming that human social history is itself a history of prayer: "through prayer we become part of a great historical solidarity" (6). But his main point is that prayer has earthly political and social ramifications. We cannot merely pray for the poor; we must pray with them. If we study the prayers of Christ we will begin to understand how radically oriented toward the poor he was. Popular piety rarely grasps the intimate connection between true Christian prayer and depth of commitment to human well-being in the social and political orders. Metz makes explicit that which is latent in the concrete life of the saints.

Metz and Rahner both speak for the ubiquity of grace. The Spirit of God is in every circumstance of human suffering and hope; and this is the essence of prayer. Many Protestant readers as well as traditional Catholics will question how prayer can be recognized as prayer without specific formation in the Word of God. This is not broached within the book, but it is a necessary question.

Rahner admits candidly that liturgical veneration of the saints is indeed optional within Catholic spirituality. Yet he contends that it is essential for all Christians to think about our relationship to the dead, and especially to those who have themselves lived in the service of God. Rahner pointedly asks about prayer to the saints in a time that finds this conception difficult because of our general indifference to the dead in today's world. We must, according to Rahner, reinterpret the doctrine of forgiveness of sins to show our solidarity with the dead. Prayer to the saints is, in essence, prayer with them.

It is ultimately the unity of love of God and love of neighbor that forges the connection. We cannot love God except by loving the neighbor whom we see and serve. This is how human beings and our love for them can lead us to God "without however coming between God and us." "In other words, the persons we love form a direct line of communication to God" (55). In this way Rahner and Metz converge to illuminate an essential part of Christian spirituality in every age.

These books remind us that a long-range process of reform and renewal of prayer and spirituality is taking place within Christianity
today that is more than a superficial response to chaotic times. We are looking for a map back to the essentials in faith and life, in theology, and in prayer. This is because those who dare confess Christ and take up their vocation as baptized into his death and resurrection have been thrown back upon the fundamental questions of identity in the world’s time and history. Like it or not, we who exercise leadership in the churches are engaged in a profound process of *semper reformanda*. But we, too, like Saint Francis and Merton, and all our spiritual guides and teachers, are embedded in history. Our various habits and assumed consolations of holiness and discipleship are in transition, along with our patterns of prayer and theology of ministry. The pain of fundamental questions, if taken seriously, gives a character of depth and urgency to an authentically human Christian spirituality. It also will, as all our authors have stressed, forge an abiding connection between prayer and our concrete, embodied ministries to the world in light of the kingdom of God.