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Quarterly Review (ISSN 0270-9287) provides continuing education resources for professional ministers in The United Methodist Church and other churches. A scholarly journal for reflection on ministry, Quarterly Review seeks to encourage discussion and debate on matters critical to the practice of ministry.

Falling within the purview of the journal are articles and reviews on biblical, theological, ethical, and ecclesiological questions; homiletics, pastoral counseling, church education, sacred music, worship, evangelism, mission, and church management; ecumenical issues; cultural and social issues where their salience to the practice of ministry can be demonstrated; and the general ministry of Christians, as part of the church's understanding of its nature and mission.

Articles for consideration are welcome from lay and professional ministers, United Methodists, and others, and should be mailed to the Editor, Quarterly Review, Box 871, Nashville, Tennessee 37202. Manuscripts should be approximately twelve to twenty-five pages in length and should be in English and typed double-spaced, and the original and one duplicate should be submitted. No sermons, poems, or devotional material are accepted. Queries are welcome. A style sheet is available on request. Payment is by fee, depending on edited length.

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Quarterly Review: A Scholarly Journal for Reflection on Ministry
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A student in an American seminary once observed a German student entering a course in Old Testament. Whereas the American had bought an entire rack of books from those listed in the syllabus, the German had only one book. On inquiry the German admitted it was the only book he intended to read for the entire course. It was a book of criticism studded with notes and containing an extensive bibliography. The American watched with admiration as the course went along, for the German student did not just read the text; he looked up every biblical reference; read the quotations cited in the notes; and read many of the works in the bibliography. By the end of the course he had received a thorough education simply by mining carefully that one book.

The thought of "drinking deeply of the Peirian spring" seems tempting. Many of us succumb to the temptation to read too widely. On analysis we will find that professional ministers actually read too narrowly and too broadly at the same time.

We read too narrowly because we tend to skip entire bodies of literature altogether. The governor of a state commented a couple of years ago that he never reads fiction because it's a waste of time. One might wonder how one whose entire career depends on storytelling could make such a statement; but then those in professional ministry often have the same vice. We read history, contemporary affairs, the social sciences—works related to our everyday tasks. By ignoring novels, stories, and poetry, we shortchange the source of images and stories on which we should rely for interpreting the gospel and for defining our own interior being.

Fiction is not the only literature we omit, however. Since many of us have been educated in the humanities, we often pay
no attention to science, engineering, and mathematics. An objective observer might wonder how we could ignore these areas since Western civilization seems to be focused on them; yet we tend to confirm C. P. Snow's dictum that we have split into "two cultures."

Professional ministers seem to read chiefly in the areas they know well—the social sciences, the humanities, the arts—and to that extent we have narrow interests. Within that interest, however, we tend to be eclectic, since our profession relies on many different branches of knowledge—history and the social sciences, ethics, the arts, education, and the religious disciplines. This eclectic tendency is compounded by the media explosion, which makes most of us objects of the world of publishing—not only those who produce books and magazines, but those who urge us to read newsletters, the propaganda of causes, professional journals, and such, as well as tapes and other forms of electronic media. The result is that we select (the meaning of eclectic) a little here and a little there and never feel totally knowledgeable about any one aspect of our professional competence.

Quarterly Review may seem to be supporting all the wrong tendencies. In this issue you will find articles on homiletics, liturgy, history, ethics, the Bible, and the social sciences. Are we nurturing the very diseases that we complain of? Perhaps not, if our eclecticism bears the stamp of quality. We also have hopes that in the future we can present material on the history, values, and religious dimensions of science and technology. For sure we hope to provide critical essays and reviews on the world of contemporary fiction, poetry, and the other arts. To some extent, then, we can encourage the dialogue between those in the "two cultures."

We also hope to publish one or two issues a year built around themes critical to the practice of ministry. Our first effort will be a special issue on professional ministry, to be published early next year (see the list of contents on the inside back cover). We believe these thematic issues can serve as resources for organized learning groups as well as for individual reflection. We are, after all, a resource for continuing education.

Charles E. Cole
THE ROLE OF THE PROPHETS AND
THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

GENE M. TUCKER

What did it mean to be a prophet in ancient Israel? What might it meant today? What was the prophetic role or institution in Israel, and is there room for such an office in the contemporary church? Those are the questions I mean to raise and address by the juxtaposition of phrases in the title.

To talk about the relation of the Old Testament prophets to the church is to raise some very complex theological and hermeneutical issues, long debated in the church, the university and even the general society. Those questions cannot be raised here, lest we lose sight of our primary concerns, but a few preliminary remarks are called for.

First, the church settled the fundamental issue long ago, and I am convinced it was right; namely, the church needs the Old Testament—and especially the prophets—in order to shape its self-understanding and to voice its convictions about God, the world, and human existence. If we cannot read the prophets, at least now and then, as if they were speaking directly to us, then we might as well give up on the rest of the Old Testament, and most of the New Testament as well, for that matter.

Second, I am convinced that we must take seriously a prophetic role for the church in our society. Woe to us—and our nation and our world—if we do not. The model for that role, to some extent at least, must be found in the Old Testament prophets. They cannot, of course, have the last word; that must be found in the gospel. But even Jesus had a prophetic role and called his disciples to be, among other things, prophetic.

Third, to read the words of the Old Testament prophets can be

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disturbing. The prophets were deeply involved in the political, social, and religious affairs of their nation. They addressed not only groups and congregations, but specific individuals—often by name—including kings and princes, and even the nation as a whole. Their presumption was astounding. They called their nation to responsibility under God. They proclaimed judgment and disaster when there was false hope, and announced salvation when there was false despair. Moreover, they continue to judge us for our silence in the face of any and all forms of injustice and oppression. It is difficult to place the newspaper and the prophetic books side by side and look away with an easy conscience. In many parts of this country it is a devastating experience just to go to a law court and observe sometimes dehumanizing forms of legal process and then hear echoing in our ears the words of Amos: "Hate evil and love good and establish justice in the gate [that is, the courts]."

We ought to trust our first impressions, our intuitive sense that the prophets have something to say about the situation of our society, and our fearful sense that the church has a prophetic role to fulfill. Such impressions can be, however, no more than the starting point, not the end of our reflection. They may form the point of departure for the serious and critical investigation of the prophetic role in Israel and its implications for the church. So I want to consider first the role of the Israelite prophets by looking at what they and others said they were, by listening to what they typically said, and by examining how they said it, for the form of expression reveals a great deal about social function. Then I shall conclude by drawing out a few of the implications for the church.

Everyone has some idea of what a prophet is, but there are a great many misconceptions in the church and in the society generally. In biblical scholarship the question of the prophetic role has received a great deal of attention in recent years, and a new understanding has emerged. I wish to examine here some half-dozen of the most popular misconceptions of the prophet as the basis for a new definition. The prophets have been understood variously as mystics who had special religious experiences, as great poets or literary figures, as theologians or
religious philosophers, as social reformers or radicals, as seers who predicted the usually distant future, and as preachers of repentance. There is at least a grain of truth in each of these images, and in some cases more than that, but every one of them basically misses the mark.

1. It is easy to see how the definition of the prophets as *visionaries or mystics* arose: they regularly report their visions and even more commonly their experience of the word of God. In a sense it is correct to identify them in terms of their special experiences, but that identification must be qualified in several ways. In the first place, they never emphasize the *means* of revelation, but only its reality and its contents. What they say in God's name is central, and the reported experiences vary considerably through the history of Old Testament prophecy. Ezekiel's vision reports are the most dramatic, but Jeremiah, only a few decades earlier, stressed the coming of the word. Moreover, for all the prophets the vision or the word of God came unbidden, and often unwanted: "The LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go prophesy to my people Israel!'" (Amos 7:15 RSV). An experience all the prophets seem to share is that of vocation, of being called, being compelled to speak in the name of God. Most important, the prophets themselves were suspicious of the claim that special experiences proved that one's word carries from God: "I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart?" (Jer. 23:25-26). The claim that supranormal or ecstatic or psychedelic experiences in themselves reveal transcendent reality is not a new or unusual one. The claim has been popularized in recent decades by a former Harvard professor named Leary on behalf of LSD and other hallucinogenics. But the prophets themselves knew that not all visions come from God.

2. Almost at the other end of the spectrum is the definition of the prophets as *poets*, thoughtful and creative literary figures. This view was popular in the literary critical era of biblical scholarship, especially in Germany in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and still is found, e.g., in courses and
books on the Bible as literature. Many prophetic words are indeed outstanding literature, filled with striking images, dramatic phrases, captivating similes, and metaphors; and most of their lines are in poetry or poetic prose. Still, it is very doubtful that any of the prophets, except possibly some of the last ones, was a literary figure at all. On the contrary, the prophets were speakers, and it is only with a generous definition of the term that what they said can be called speeches. They presented short, memorable addresses, many of them no more than two or three verses long. There may be as many as fifty such addresses in the short Book of Amos. The prophetic books, we now know, were not written by the prophets, but represent collections of the originally oral speeches, as well as reports of the prophet's activities and—in most cases—additions by later interpreters and editors. The process which transformed the short addresses into books would have been initiated by the followers or disciples of the prophets, which groups sometimes included secretaries like Jeremiah's friend Baruch. Consequently, if we wish to hear the earliest prophetic addresses we must learn to separate the original units from one another, and from the later additions.

3. Then are the prophets theologians or religious philosophers? We theologians, including biblical theologians and ministers, would like to think so. Certainly the prophetic books contain theology. They constantly speak of God, the world, and human nature. They are especially concerned about the will of God, and the relationship of God to the nation and to individuals. It is a serious mistake, however, to look to the prophets for doctrines: they simply did not organize their addresses systematically, and for the most part they were not preoccupied with answering theological questions as such. They would have vigorously resisted the attempt to find in their words certain timeless truths. They seem to have been quite emphatic in denying that the word of God was a dogma. In view of what we have seen about the oral and often spontaneous character of their addresses, it is best to think of their words as messages in particular situations, addressing the problems at hand. This interpretation explains in part why it is so difficult even to translate the speeches of a particular prophet into a
systematic theological summary, or even to a single message, and it explains why the messages of the individual prophets often differ so much from one another. The word of God for one time and place may not be the same for another historical occasion, which is why it was difficult to distinguish between true and false prophecy in ancient Israel, as it is today.

But not just any message, claimed to be from God, deserves to be called prophetic. For all of the differences among the prophetic messages—and even dramatic contrasts, from uncompromising and total judgment to unqualified salvation—there are certain persistent themes in the Old Testament prophets, and perhaps even more significant, certain theological assumptions which they seem to share.

Among the persistent prophetic themes is what appears to be a criticism of the status quo. (We should hasten to point out that there were exceptions; some prophets, especially some of the last ones, spoke for the established institutions.) What sounds like criticism of things as they are might more accurately be described as a reversal of expectations. To those who expect peace and prosperity they proclaim the coming of disaster. The words of Amos are not unusual:

Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD!
Why would you have the day of the LORD?
It is darkness, and not light;
as if a man fled from a lion,
and a bear met him;
or went into the house and leaned
with his hand against the wall,
and a serpent bit him.
Is not the day of the LORD darkness,
and not light,
and gloom with no brightness in it? (Amos 5:18-20)

To those who rely on faithful observance of religious ritual they cry that such confidence is unfounded (compare Amos 5:21-27; Isa. 1:10-17). And to those whose faith and hope are fading they can declare:
For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not
depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall
not be removed,
says the LORD, who has
compassion on you.
(Isa. 54:10)

Another theme which must be mentioned even in the shortest list of prophetic theological motifs is represented by the frequent linking of two powerful terms: justice and righteousness. These terms, and the point of view which they summarize, are found everywhere in the prophets. The first term, justice, in both its Hebrew and its English forms, is originally at home in the law court. In Israel, the decision (judgment) establishing justice was pronounced at the conclusion of the trial, restoring right and fair relationships among the parties. Justice came then to be the claim each person has upon others in the society, and which God has upon the people. The dimension emphasized by the prophets is the failure of justice at the social level, specifically the oppression of the poor and the powerless. Law and order must be maintained, and that means the weak must be protected from the strong. To withhold power, or to misuse it, is a distortion of God's will, whether the power be economic, political, or military. Israel's crime, says Amos, is selling the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes, trampling the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and denying legal due process to the afflicted (Amos 2:6-7). Righteousness, often a legal concept, also, has a somewhat broader meaning. One is righteous who fulfills the demands or established expectations in a relationship, whether with other persons or with God. Fulfillment of righteousness establishes a whole and peaceful community. In the context of the covenant, righteousness entails obedience to the law. The prophets speak of the need for or the failure of justice and righteousness when they indict Israel, but they also see justice and righteousness as the foundation for their visions of the future:
ROLE OF THE PROPHETS AND CHURCH

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government will be upon
his shoulder,
and his name will be called
“Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of
Peace.”
Of the increase of his government
and of peace
there will be no end,
upon the throne of David, and over
his kingdom,
to establish it, and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and for
evermore. (Isa. 9:6-7)

Justice and righteousness are not empty terms, nor are they vague concepts. They refer to the concrete and specific actions of persons in relationships when they accord others what is due to them. They are the foundations of society at its best.

In addition to these and other persistent motifs, most of the prophets share certain theological assumptions. Many of these presuppositions are taken so much for granted that they are not spelled out; they are like the air the prophets breathe. Many such assumptions deserve extended treatment, but we can mention only three of them here, their assumptions about God, history, and society. The message of every prophet was based on the conviction that Yahweh, the God of Israel, was also lord of all the earth and all history. This lord had established a covenant with Israel, was active in human events, and communicated with human beings. His purpose was to save, but he also could be counted on to judge and punish wrong. Not infrequently the prophetic vision of Yahweh’s lordship encompassed all nations. Above all, the prophets condemned any effort to practice polytheism, whether in the form of the worship of idols or in the form of giving less than full allegiance to Yahweh. In fact, one scholar has recently proposed that the impulse to “monotheize” is what distinguishes true from false prophecy.¹
A second basic theological assumption concerns the reality and importance of history. The prophets always were historically concrete. They did not take flight to another realm of reality, either within the individual human heart or beyond history. When they speak of a kingdom of God they refer to God’s rule within and among human beings in ordinary time and space. Surely they knew the difference between sacred and profane, but ordinary, profane events were sacred because it was within them that God was active. Consequently, there was a willingness to face the reality and even the terror of historical contingency. Contingent events, ever new, ever different, and finally unpredictable, could be lived because they were also where one encountered God. Nor can the prophetic view of history be called deterministic because it is the arena of divine activity. Rather, history was seen to be created by the interaction of human beings with one another and with God. Even what God does in history depends upon the actions and reactions of human beings.

Next, the prophetic assumptions about society were equally concrete and specific. The stress on the communal dimensions of reality is unmistakable. God elected a people, not individuals. The prophets spoke of justice and righteousness that could only be understood in the framework of human community. When they announced judgment it was most commonly upon the nation as a whole, for they knew that the entire body politic could suffer for the crimes of even a few. When they announced future salvation it was for a people, for they knew that no one can be completely whole unless the rights of all are respected. Above all, they were aware of the interdependence of all parts of society and of all individuals.

These theological motifs and assumptions suggest that certain central religious categories must be reconsidered. For example, salvation in Israel was never a spiritualistic or even a strictly spiritual term in our usual understanding of the word. Salvation included many facets, some of which involved some material things: having a place to live, a space of one’s own, breathing room, and food to eat. That land flowing with milk and honey was a fulfillment of God’s will. Salvation also meant having sufficient control over one’s destiny to act out one’s responsibil-
ity before God and other human beings. Judgment was equally concrete, historical, and corporate. It entailed death, destruction, enslavement, the loss of human dignity, or the loss of human community.

The prophets were not theologians, but their messages contain and are founded upon powerful theological content which is difficult to ignore.

4. What we have said about the message of the prophets might seem to suggest that they were social reformers or radicals, but not so. They do call for change on occasion, and their words sound radical in the ears of many, but they do not proclaim a new morality, or an original vision of the just society. They do not propound new laws but constantly refer to the old ones; they do not propose a new understanding of God, but constantly refer to the old traditions: Remember the God who brought you out of Egypt, or who gave you the city of Jerusalem and the Davidic monarchy. They were not radical, but conservative, calling Israel back to its roots. Israel, they remind the people, has always known what God expected of her.

On this point it is useful to review briefly the history of the interpretation of the prophets in relation to the law. Which came first, the law or the prophets? Perhaps surprisingly, the answers to this question often had profound implications for the understanding of the prophets and for their use in the church and the society. The traditional view in the church and the synagogue was based on confidence in the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch or the Torah. First there was the law, given through Moses, and then came the prophets, who commonly were understood as interpreters of the law. The order was reversed just over a century ago in critical scholarship and popularized by the work of Julius Wellhausen. The Pentateuch, composed of some four written sources, was written long after Moses; in its final form it was composed no earlier than the Babylonian Exile, long after the classical prophets. This dating of the Old Testament literature, including the prophets, led to a rewriting of the history of the religion of Israel, and to a new appreciation of the prophets. Since they came before the law they were seen as great creative individuals. They were the ones, it was said, who established ethical monotheism, who
raised religion above the level of the primitive or the nationalistic and as a matter of fact to its highest levels. They were religious and social reformers, but they failed. After they left the scene the religion of Israel was thought to have degenerated into the ritualistic legalism represented by the law. This view of the prophets as creative and reforming individuals was very popular in Protestantism, in part because of its antilegalistic overtones. Moreover, it was this image of the prophets as charismatic reformers which helped to give rise to and to sustain the Social Gospel.

The present situation in the study of the prophets as well as the investigation of the Pentateuch sees a much more complex relationship between the two than either of the previous views. It is, however, perhaps closer to the traditional perspective than to that of late nineteenth-century critical scholarship. On the one hand, more careful study of the Pentateuch has demonstrated that while its final form was written quite late, it is based on and contains oral traditions which are quite ancient, much older than the classical prophets. Study of the prophets, on the other hand, shows that they constantly appeal to and reiterate ancient traditions. This appeal and reiteration occurs in two ways. First, as already indicated, with regard to laws or the obligations of the people, they always take it for granted that Israel has long known what is expected in the covenant with Yahweh. They rarely cite the laws themselves, but their accusations and indictments are based on old legal traditions. The problem is not that Israel did not know, but that Israel did not do. So the prophets introduce no new and higher morality, and do not even appear to radicalize the old laws, which were sufficiently demanding to begin with. Second, all of the prophets stand in certain theological traditions which had been important for centuries before them. Not all, to be sure, stand in the same theological streams. Hosea, Amos, and others frequently allude to the story which is told in the Hexateuch: Yahweh is the one who made promises to the patriarchs, brought Israel out of Egypt, led and cared for the people in the wilderness, and delivered them into the land of Canaan. Isaiah and Micah, on the other hand, hardly refer to those foundational events, but stress the choice of Jerusalem as a holy city and
establishment of the dynasty of David as saving events. Ezekiel and Second Isaiah bring many of these themes together. So the prophets invented neither morality nor theology. What is new and distinctive is their concern with the future.

5. Are they, then, seers who predicted the future? That is a very popular understanding of prophecy, but it is indebted more to the interpretation of the Apocalypse of John and the Book of Daniel as prophecy than it is to a careful reading of the Old Testament prophets. It is fundamental that the Old Testament prophets are concerned with the future, but it is clear from even a casual reading of the prophetic books that their concern is with a future within history and society as presently known, and—with a few exceptions—an immediate future.

Two other points should be stressed in this regard. First, the prophets do not predict but announce future events as divine intervention into history. That announcement may be of judgment or of salvation. This conclusion is obvious from what has come to be called the basic form of prophetic speech. To be sure, the prophets were able to employ virtually all forms of address current in their society, but the most distinctive and common form was the announcement. Amos 4:1-3 is a typical example. Notice the elements in the structure of this address:

"Hear this word, you cows of Bashan,
who are in the mountain of Samaria,
who oppress the poor, who crush the needy,
who say to their husbands, 'Bring, that we may drink!'
The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness that, behold, the days are coming upon you,
when they shall take you away with hooks,
even the last of you with fishhooks.
And you shall go out through the breaches,
every one straight before her;
and you shall be cast forth into Harmon,”
says the LORD.

The speech begins with a call to attention—a summons to hear—addressed to a particular group, the wealthy women of Samaria. Next comes an indictment or an accusation, or reasons for punishment: “[you] who oppress the poor, who crush the needy.” Then comes a transition which moves from present to future and identifies the words which follow as word of God: “The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness/that, behold, . . .” The final major element is the announcement of judgment or punishment itself: “behold, the days are coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks.” The address is rounded off with an oracle formula, “says the LORD.”

This is no prediction, but an announcement. It is as if a notice were posted on a bulletin board: “The meeting will be on Thursday at 3:00 P.M. in room 251.” That is a far cry from what we hear from weather reporters or oddsmakers. Notice that when judgment is announced the prophet gives the reasons for it by listing the crimes of the addressees. It is theologically significant that when salvation is announced, as, for example, in Second Isaiah, no reasons are required beyond God’s initiative to save his people.

A second factor in the prophetic addresses distinguishes them from predictions. The prophet’s word concerning the future, because it was believed to come from God, is powerful and effective, itself changing the future. This understanding is revealed explicitly in several texts, including a reference in Jeremiah’s report of his call. It comes at the conclusion, when Jeremiah is given his commission to be a prophet:

Then the LORD put forth his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me,
“Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant” (Jer. 1:9-10).
The conviction that the prophetic word changes history is equally strong in the motto to the Book of Amos:

"The LORD roars from Zion, 
and utters his voice from Jerusalem; [through the prophet] 
the pastures of the shepherds mourn, 
and the top of Carmel withers" (Amos 1:2).

The prophet's word is the word of God, and thus powerful. That explains why the people of Israel did not simply ignore the uncomfortable words of these spokesmen, but attempted over and over to shut them up.

6. What we have seen from these examples—and they could be multiplied—also demonstrates that the prophets were not primarily preachers of repentance. That is an image shaped, I suspect, by the reports of John the Baptist in the New Testament, and by the fact that occasionally the prophets do call for change. It is those occasional calls for repentance which seem to form the Protestant lectionary for prophetic preaching: "Seek the LORD and live, lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph" (Amos 5:6). But such calls are the rare exception and not the rule. What is missing in the prophetic messages, for the most part, is a positive program for reform or change, either of the society or the individual. Indictments and accusations are given as reasons for punishment, not as calls to turn aside from evil ways. According to the prophets of doom, it was too late for change. One may argue that by their indictments and words of judgment they hoped to strike such fear in the hearts of the people that they would change. In the story of Jonah that is what happened when the prophet uttered his one-line announcement of judgment on Nineveh. But as serious interpreters we are obliged first to take seriously the words themselves, before speculating on the motivations for them. Still, it is easy to see how the old words of doom could later become part of admonitions and exhortations to change. That process had begun already in ancient Israel. We see, for example, in some of the late exilic additions to the Book of Jeremiah a pattern to the speeches. The old words of Jeremiah become, in effect, the texts of sermons which say: Judgment was announced because of
your disobedience, and it came in the form of the Exile. Now listen to the voice of the LORD and be obedient, lest judgment come again.

On the basis of what has been said both positively and negatively about this series of alternatives we may now summarize our understanding of the prophetic role. If that definition must be reduced to a sentence, it is this: the prophet in Israel was the one who spoke God's word for the immediate future. The prophet experienced a call, a vocation or summons to speak in the name of God, and what he spoke was—for the most part—announcement of judgment or of salvation. Though they were not theologians the prophets tended to echo the same basic themes and share some central assumptions: God expects justice and righteousness now, in history and human society. Moreover, God is about to act.

What, then, would a prophetic role for the church and its ministry include or entail? At the very least we must maintain a continuous dialogue with the Old Testament prophetic words and allow them to shape our consciousness of the present and our visions of possible futures. But it is a difficult and frightening task to be prophetic. Certainly not all aspects of the Old Testament prophetic role can or should be claimed by the church or by Christian ministers. In every case our appropriation of the prophetic role or message must be through the filter of a Christian hermeneutic. Furthermore, just as the prophetic word was different depending upon the historical circumstances, no single prophetic message fits every situation. What was said recently about preaching certainly applies here: "If preaching is to be word of God, it must not only be true, but appropriate. 'Meet and right' is still a good expression." Having said all that, however, we must acknowledge that more often than we are willing to accept it, our calling, the historical circumstances, and the word of God thrust the prophetic role upon us.

Most of the other conceptions of the prophetic role are easier to cope with—one way or another—than the one which I have described here. If we see the prophets as mystics, it is easy to dismiss the role if we have had no dramatic visionary or other ecstatic experiences. If we see the prophets as poets, it is easy to
sit back and admire their beautiful compositions. If we see them as religious philosophers or theologians, it is not difficult to identify them with the reflective and intellectual dimensions of our ministry. Many find it easy and even satisfying to identify with the prophets as preachers of repentance, and some seem to enjoy berating congregations for their sins. It is even relatively simple to identify with the prophets as social reformers or radicals, and either accept or reject that role for the church.

But to proclaim the revealed word of God concerning the future—that is another matter entirely. That is a terrifying challenge, but one which—on at least some occasions—must be identified with the verbal and vocal role of the church and its ministry, including preaching. Such a role appears impossible for us only if we assume that the prophetic word appears out of thin air, or comes entirely as a spontaneous, individual experience of revelation. These versions of the prophetic word as occurring independently were not true for the Old Testament prophets, and need not be for us. Gerhard von Rad's summary of the prophetic role is especially helpful—and even liberating. The prophet's experience of the word which he then proclaimed was based, von Rad demonstrated, on the particular theological traditions in which he stood, and was shaped by the specific historical circumstances of the time.9 We have noted how some prophets live and breathe the old traditions of the Exodus and others the traditions of Zion and David.

Certainly we all stand in rich theological traditions which shape our understanding and make possible our apprehension of divine truth. For us those traditions now include the prophetic words themselves, and at the heart of those traditions stands the good news revealed through Jesus Christ, including a vision of the kingdom of God. Through such traditions we are called to view and interpret the events of our specific times and places.

All that we have said thus far indicates that it would be a mistake to give a set of instructions on how to become a prophet, or to summarize what the prophetic word is. Still, in particular circumstances one can proclaim the prophetic word. I heard a fine and courageous prophetic sermon in a suburban, basically middle-class church on the Sunday after the American hostages had been released from Iran. The text came from the lectionary,
Matt. 4:11-17, which quotes Isa. 9:1-2: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." What an appropriate text for the occasion! The pastor spoke of the release of the hostages, the joy experienced by them, their families, and all Americans. This event, he suggested, is not necessarily the coming of the kingdom of God, but the kingdom of God is like that. That was one prophetic word. Then he turned, with gentle concern but also with firmness, to the dark side of the American response to the events: the anger and cries of retribution which followed the reports of bad treatment of some of the hostages. Then came the other prophetic word: If we acquiesce to those feelings then we will plunge ourselves back into darkness. One may pay a price, but it is possible to proclaim prophetic words.

A prophetic ministry which looks to the Old Testament prophets will entail at least the following elements:

First, a sense of vocation, of responsiveness to God and responsibility to and for the world. To be sure, we have heard and will continue to hear our calls in different ways, but we must keep our ears open for still small voices. Many will hear a call to speak through encounter with biblical texts. Some have also perceived in newspaper reports of human need, or starvation, or injustice the call of God to proclaim certain words. Some have even heard God's call to speak in the daily reports of the pollution level of American cities.

Second, a prophetic ministry will have a sense of the power of the Word, and even of human words, to change history. We can no longer retrieve that notion as it was alive in ancient Israel, but the notion of the power of the Word to change things belongs in the traditional definition of ministerial functions. Why else would we take the time and trouble to preach, and why would anyone listen? No preacher is powerless unless he or she chooses not to speak effective words. We know the power of words in very mundane ways. Persons who say "I do" in certain prescribed circumstances find that their lives are changed. Or by choosing to eliminate the vocabulary of sexism or racism we help to build a more just society.

A third element of any prophetic ministry will be a deep awareness of historical concreteness in religious life. Concrete human relationships and experiences have ultimate significance. At
least as far as our neighbors are concerned, physical and material considerations—such as food and health and housing—are essential matters. Not so incidentally, that is good incarnation theology: the rule of God, including the embodiment of justice and righteousness, is not just for the world to come, but also for this world.

Fourth, any prophetic understanding of the church and its ministry will have a profound sense of the social, corporate, and institutional dimensions of human life. Such an awareness is especially important in a society which tends to stress radical individualism, which likes to think of itself as a nation of self-made men. These are two persistent frontier images by which we understand American life and history. One is that picture of the cabin on the frontier; standing beside it is the lonely, solitary individual with his rifle against the wilderness, and his plow to till the ground. That is the one we remember. But the other image also comes from the American drive to move West. It is the barn-raising, when all members of the community came together to help one another, to create a society, and to celebrate even their need for one another. The prophetic role will emphasize that second image, the communal dimension, reorganizing the power and importance of institutional structures. The prophetic dimension of the church’s ministry will be aware that justice and righteousness, and faithfulness to God, are corporate realities or they do not exist at all.

Finally, the prophetic role entails a moral decisiveness which is both specific and courageous. The prophet has the courage, literally, of his or her convictions. If we do not call the society to account in the name of God, who will? If we do not hold out a vision of the just and righteous society, who will? If we see disaster coming, we should have the courage to say so because we know that, as Peter said to the high priest, we must obey God rather than men, and because we know that—perhaps even beyond judgment—God’s last word is good news.

NOTES

Response to “The Role of the Prophets and the Role of the Church”

FROM A UNIVERSITY CHAPLAIN

Tucker writes about five clearly identifiable features of the prophetic office which stand both the test of historical and form criticism. He or she who would be prophet must be called of God to that often thankless task. As Tucker puts it, “we must keep our ears open for still small voices.” And hearing such a call, whether it be from the elements of our own culture or from the biblical tradition grounding our reflection, the prophet must respond. Thus, Tucker appropriately speaks about both the claims made upon the prophet by the received word and the power of that word uttered in prophetic speech. Prophetic speech is not without consequences, either personal or social. Witness the power implicated in the capacity to speak to another in his or her own language when that language is other than our own. Whether that be the language of poetry or of computers, the vocabulary of physics or ethics, the thought-forms of urban
planning or aesthetics, we in higher education ministry have often recognized that the capacity to speak a valuing word across language communities establishes new bases for trans-disciplinary community. The prophetic word, uttered in response to a vision of God's intention for creation, actually changes relationships.

In this observation we confirm Tucker's third dimension of the prophetic role and affirm its relevance for our own ministry in the university. For in truth the prophetic word is uttered in historically concrete, contextually specific situations. How often, though, we generalize God's speech and in that process render it innocuous, insipid, or diffused. The prophetic office is tuned to the ebb and flow of concrete historical moments, and in those moments the prophet utters words of both judgment and salvation, words of critique and renewal.

Tucker's fourth characteristic of the prophetic role speaks forthrightly to what some have identified as a malaise in contemporary American culture. The prophet calls for new awareness of the corporate, social, and institutional dimensions of life. The prophet calls for new community in the face of fragmented disciplinary specialization. The prophet calls for new ministry as a generalist confronting the partialities of specialized knowledge resident in the university's components today and calling for a new holism which seeks in the pursuit of knowledge the unity of God's truth and value. In environments within the university which are every bit as competitive and individualistic as those of the society at large, the prophet stands against, resists models of personhood which laud rugged, isolationistic, individualism. By word and deed, the prophet in higher education occupies a moral stance (Tucker's final characterization) which empowers communities of critical inquiry in resistance to privatized individuality.

The prophet's task in institutions of higher education may be described with reference to one whose life was spent in the quest for an integrated and value-based role for those who claimed Judeo and Christian traditions as their own in higher education, Kenneth Underwood. He called for those who found themselves within these religious traditions to engage in value-based
teaching and learning under the rubric, "prophetic inquiry." Each of Tucker's characteristics of the prophetic role within society can be interpreted for the life of the university within the construct of Underwood's prophetic inquiry. Thus, the prophet is the one who questions, the one who dares call the institution and its citizens to account for the values which gave it life in its beginning and which have been submerged by the accumulations of culture today. The prophet speaks with reference to a call, a call which is his or her vocation, and with reference to a vision of God's future for creation. And in speaking the prophet changes things, changes relationships, changes the way institutional life is put together.

William M. Finnin, Jr.
Chaplain, Southern Methodist University

FROM A CHURCH AND COMMUNITY WORKER

The first element of a prophetic ministry, "a sense of vocation, of responsiveness to God and responsibility to and for the world," is pertinent to church and community ministry. As a church and community worker, one seeks to find the needs and injustices around us and lift these up to the community of faith and the community in general that we might respond accordingly.

Often as a church and community worker, one is afforded the opportunity to use the second prophetic element, "The power of the Word . . . to change history." We are sometimes asked to fill pulpits as lay speakers. More often, however, we are giving programs for various groups in our churches and community organizations. It is at these points that the prophetic power of the Word can and is most often effective in lifting up the injustices and dehumanizing acts that take place in our communities.

"A deep awareness of historical concreteness in religious life," the third element of a prophetic ministry, is valid for me and many other church and community workers. It is particularly valid in that Christian education plays an important part of my ministry. Portions of time are spent in leadership training for local laity to equip them for working with their
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particular age group in the local church. Time is also spent in the actual classroom with the various classes. During the summer more time is spent in concentrated amounts with the groups in vacation church schools and camp meetings.

It seems to me that the first three elements lead naturally to the fourth element, in which there will be "a profound sense of the social, corporate, and institutional dimensions of human life." It seems that the first three equip one to be in action for the fourth, which calls us to an awareness "that justice and righteousness, and faithfulness to God, are corporate realities or they do not exist." This element is what involves me with Crossline Ministry, Alpha House (prison halfway house), Sigma House (an alcoholic treatment center), disaster response on the national level as a representative of UMCOR, community outreach ministry, legislative issues, etc.

As one continues through these elements, as one builds on the other, it seems to me that if the first four take place that the fifth element of entailing "a moral decisiveness which is both specific and courageous" will have been accomplished through the specific actions taken in the fourth element; and ours is the opportunity to challenge ourselves and those around us continually to see that we call ourselves and society to account for our actions in the name of God—that is, if we expect a prophetic ministry to be real and vital in the lives of those with whom we minister.

Judy Atwood, deaconness, diaconal minister, and church and community worker
Springfield, Missouri

FROM A VA CHAPLAIN

In any assessment of the messages of Old Testament prophets there remains little doubt as to the audience. Invariably God's Word is spoken to the chosen, be they nation or remnant. The chaplain who would be prophet does not always enjoy the luxury of announcing the Word of God to a people who want to hear that Word. Neither is there an affinity or passion on the part of the institution in which the chaplain serves to listen, much
less be told. All too often the chaplain barely has a foot in the door and is a colleague to be tolerated.

In suggesting that the chaplain might be “persona non grata” in the context of assuming the prophetic role, I am not implying that the prophets of Scripture spoke to willing listeners in each instance. Instead, the emphasis is placed on understanding the relationship between the chaplain as message-bearer and the institution as recipient. Aside from church-related agencies, other care-giving establishments are not required to have a covenantal understanding that includes a sense of obligation to a body of believers. Theirs is an alliance based on contract (by law), governed by fee for service (rendered to the client), and motivated by profit (fiscal gain for the shareholder).

To whom then does the chaplain speak the Word of God? If not the agency, then the chaplain must be in conversation with the client or consumer. Here again the conundrum arises. Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish chaplains are clear about their relationships. Believer and priest or rabbi have established covenantal relationships. They are able to converse liturgically, sacramentally, and pastorally, for there is a historic context both speaker and listener embrace. The Protestant chaplain is not so blessed. At best the Protestant chaplain may encounter a client of the same denominational background. In this instance the Word is understood by speaker and hearer. The Word finds easy expression.

More frequently the Protestant chaplain encounters a client of another denominational persuasion. The essential task then becomes establishing a common language and shared history. To this process the chaplain must bring an acute sensitivity toward sectarian perspectives and histories. For the Word to be spoken it must be translated into the client’s existential context. An intelligible, concrete history must exist and be understood for the prophetic role to be realized.

A final dilemma limiting the embodiment of the prophetic role can be experienced. In most institutions the “unchurched” client becomes the responsibility of the Protestant chaplain. In the case of biblical prophet, the ultimate concern is to remind Israel what it means to be a people set apart. In contemporary
terms, the prophetic role calls to the attention of the churches what it means to be the churches.

The primary task of the chaplain in relation to the "unchurched" is not to fulfill the prophetic role. The chaplain brings into relationship those who stand outside the covenant with God. As one colleague put it, the job of a chaplain is to "preach the love of Jesus" to every patient. Only when the covenant is acknowledged can the prophetic be embodied and "God's Word for the immediate future" be spoken.

Theodore L. Bleck
Protestant chaplain, VA Hospital
Oanandaigua, New York

FROM A PASTOR

Models of authentic prophetic ministry are desperately needed today. Ministers of the Word are laden with the need to be prophet to the times. Further laboring of this fact is not needed. Having models that are practical and realistic, reasonable, authentic is the critical need today. The resurgent interest in religious faith makes it particularly important to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic prophetic ministry. False prophets are as dangerous today as in the time of Jeremiah or Paul. The distortion that sees the prophet as a social reformer or radical needs correction. Tucker points out, "They were not radical, but conservative, calling Israel back to her roots." It was not the prophet's purpose to bring about social reform, but to remind the people what God expected of them.

When Tucker gets to the point of defining the prophetic role for the church and its ministry, he fails to be as explicit and thorough as when he is analyzing the role of the prophets. He cautions, "it would be a mistake to give a set of instructions on how to become a prophet, or to summarize what the prophetic word is." This is the point when he relates the "fine and courageous prophetic sermon in a suburban, basically middle-class church on the Sunday after the American hostages had been released." The elements of a prophetic ministry are accurate, appropriate, and realistic. Unfortunately, he doesn't give much attention to these points. This should have been the
heart of the article. Yet, the points are treated too briefly with little practical application. It would have been most helpful for Tucker to spell out the prophets' themes in terms of the contemporary situation. For example, the sense of community and the concepts of salvation and judgment have strong implications for our day.

Tucker has clearly distinguished between the prophetic message and apocalyptic material. In a time when there is a great deal of interest in eschatology, we need to be careful not to misuse the prophets. Those who are merely curious about the future will not find much help in the prophets.

In this article, Tucker has been helpful in giving clear, cogent information on the prophets. He would have been more helpful had he given more models and applications of the prophetic role. Nevertheless, the article is quite helpful for the minister who is seeking to be true to the Word.

T. Leo Brannon
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They came to me as their pastor. They said they were calling it quits in their marriage. When I asked them why, they said, "Because we don't love each other anymore. After all, isn't that what marriage is all about?"

Liturgically speaking, marriage is mostly a promise. In the fifteenth century, the Council of Florence agreed that "the efficient cause of marriage is regularly the mutual consent uttered aloud on the spot."1 Peel away the accumulated liturgical bric-a-brac from a modern marriage service and what you have is simply a set of promises uttered before witnesses. In this article I hope to show some of the moral consequences of the liturgical fact that marriage is nothing more nor less than a promise.2

A quick perusal of the marriage services of any number of Christian traditions will reveal that the language of the services is the language of promising. In all these services, amazingly little interest is shown in the qualifications of the bride and groom for the pact they are about to make. One cannot be licensed to drive an automobile without a driver's test, but the church seems to assume that just about any novice can marry. While some premarital counseling with the pastor has become de rigueur for most couples who are married in a church, no consideration is given within the service itself to the results of such counseling. After all, the church seems to be saying in its older marriage liturgies, how much training is required simply to make a vow? Preparation may not be the problem.

At an obviously emotional moment in life, the traditional
service of holy matrimony is unashamedly oblivious to the feelings of the bride and groom. While much time and effort has normally been expended during the couple's courtship on "this crazy thing called love," the marriage service barely gives a nod to love or loving feeling as prerequisite for wedlock. Where love is mentioned, it takes an inconspicuous place on the bench beside other virtues such as honoring, cherishing, and keeping. The mention of virtue in the marriage service is only as a future activity, an expectation and not a prerequisite. Never does the minister ask, "John, do you love Susan?" The question is, "John, will you love Susan?" Love is here being defined as a promise, an act of the will, something one decides to do. That definition of love seems counter to everything we have been taught to believe about love; Hollywood will not buy it and romantics will chafe under so mundane a definition of that which they have sought to limit to the realm of gushy feelings, physical arousal, mindless oblivion, passionate abandon, and nothing more.

But the church (when it has been at its best) has rarely cared what the culture was selling or buying at any given moment in history. Where "love" is being bought and sold, the church, in the marriage service, protests that what we moderns are most often buying is merely pagan love; feelings and nothing more, hardly anything substantial enough to build a life upon, nothing so hearty or risky as the love of which we speak. Nothing so creative. Only an unqualified promise can sustain that love, and therefore a promise is the only liturgical requirement for a Christian marriage, the only thing asked of a couple in a Christian marriage service. Marriage is nothing more nor less than a promise.

"But," a friend of mine who is a pastoral counselor asked, "is this saying enough? After all, a promise is just a set of words, nothing more." Perhaps, he argued, we should make a careful distinction between a "mere wedding"—which is just a set of words with lots of lace, candles, flowers, cake, and hoopla—and a "real" marriage which is an action, a way of life, an experience of mutual growth, a lived relationship between two people. Or, say some of my liturgical friends, we should at least speak of marriage as a "sacrament," a "means of grace," or some other
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sacred designation which makes the wedding sound more sanctified, more dramatic, more effective than mere human promise-making.

DOING THINGS WITH WORDS

The suggestion that the service of marriage and its promise are "mere words" raises some fundamental questions about the nature of words and the relationship of our words (such as the words used in a promise) to reality. If the liturgical act of a marriage basically involves the using of certain words to make promises, then we might take a step further back and ask, "What does it mean to use words to make a promise?" Are the words of our promises "mere words" and "nothing more"?

In thinking about our words, whether they be words which are used to make promises or to order a loaf of bread at the corner grocery, we are heirs to two problems within the Western philosophical tradition, which tend to confuse us about what words do. First, there is a belief in much Western philosophy that the meaning of a symbol (like a word) depends on its ability to represent faithfully some "real" object or idea. The meaning of a descriptive statement, like, "The chair is red," is proved only by a careful examination of the chair itself. The proof of the statement, "I take you as my husband,\," is said to be only in the actual intention and in long-term results of the taking.

Second, most Western philosophy has described the sole function of our words as the communication of truth. Words describe, represent, express point to, indicate the existence of some reality which the words merely communicate to our minds. Words are merely tools to help us get handles on certain truths. A major task of Western philosophy has been to "get behind" these verbal symbols to find the reality, the truth, the things in themselves which the words represent. Those who speak of our words, the words of promising or any other kinds of words as "mere words" are simply reflecting what Western thought has taught us to believe about the function of language.

The debate in the late Middle Ages over the relationship of words to reality itself was won by William of Ockham, so far as most modern secular and scientific thought is concerned. This
fourteenth-century philosopher took a position which came to be known as nominalism. The pure nominalist believes that words do not refer to any objective reality as such. Words are merely names which we attach to certain objects and ideas but which do not represent the essence of those objects and ideas. There is no necessary connection between the words and the objects which they represent. For the nominalist, reality consists of individual objects or events. The mind抽象s from certain experiences and labels or "names" these abstract ideas (hence "nominalism"). Most people who have grown up amid scientific empiricism are nominalists. They are distrustful of any claim that our words are more than "mere words," more than a set of culturally defined labels which we attach to given sets of experiences. Our words, to the nominalist, are merely conventional modes of expression which are dependent only upon the speaker’s and the hearer’s particular understanding of a given experience. The truth of a set of words depends upon the understanding of the speaker and how the speaker chooses to express that understanding; "I believe in God" is a statement of no independent validity. It is only a description which depends upon my understanding of "belief" and my understanding of this set of experiences I choose to name as "God." In general, modern secular and scientific thought has totally and uncritically accepted the representational, nominalistic quality of language. A promise, to the nominalist, is merely, a set of words which represent some inner disposition. The couple who seeks to end the vow of marriage by pleading that, "we did not really know what we were doing at the time we married," or "we no longer love each other anymore," or other similar pleas based upon a change or a fault within their disposition toward the words of the vow, are pleading from the standpoint of good nominalist philosophy. After all, who would urge such people to stick with a marriage on the basis of a mere set of words when the disposition and affections which gave those words meaning have now dissipated? Are not the words of the vow mere representations of a reality? When the reality is gone, the mere words are meaningless.

Situation ethics is basically a nominalist approach to ethics. Situation ethics denies that any values have abiding, inherent,
intrinsic value within themselves. There are only characteristics which happen to be meant and valued by persons. Extrinsicism agrees with nominalism in maintaining that all meaning comes from outside the thing itself; a course of action can be called "good" only as a by-product of the good intentions of a particular person.

The nominalistic and extrinsic view of language and ethics has been challenged in our century. Twentieth-century studies in the semantics of language have led philosophers to deal with the function of language rather than abstract definitions of the essence of language. The way words are used and the consequences of their use are more important and diversified than a simple representation of reality. Representation of the world through the use of words, describing given realities through the use of verbal symbols, is only one of the things which language does.

The philosopher of language J. W. Austin, in *How to Do Things with Words*, argues that there are some declarative statements which do not "describe," "report," or "represent" anything at all. They are not true or false in the sense that statements of fact are. There are declarative statements which are, in *themsevles*, activities. They are the making of facts rather than the mere description of facts. Our speech *makes* promises rather than merely reports on promises. Some speech can only be understood as doing something. For example, to say "I will give you a loaf of bread," or "I take this man to be my wedded husband," is not to describe what I am doing. It is to do it. It is not to report on a gift or to describe a marriage, it is to make a gift or to make a marriage. Austin calls this "performative language" or, in legal jargon, "operative speech." It is language which does something.

Admittedly, it is hardly a gift to say, "I will give you a loaf of bread," and then never hand it over. It is hardly a marriage to say, "I will be faithful," and then lapse into infidelity. There are certain circumstances, certain things that must be done and said if the statements are to do what they claim to do. We therefore demand that performative utterances be spoken "seriously." Joking or poetic license is not permitted. We also demand that performative utterances be spoken freely, without coercion. But
if a performative utterance is spoken in seriousness and in freedom, the deed is done. To say, "I bless you," is not to describe a blessing but rather to bless. To say, "A curse upon you," is not to report on cursing but rather to curse. To say, "I take you as my lawfully wedded wife," is not to symbolize or represent a marriage but rather to marry.

It is little help to speak of the words of a performative act like marriage as being an "outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace," as many of our marriage rituals do. To speak in this fashion implies that we regard the words as only an outward description of some invisible, more important, inward performance.

Edward Schillebeeckx notes, "Human marriage is not indissoluble because it is a sacrament; rather it is a sacrament because and insofar as it contains the will to develop itself in unbreakable covenant fidelity."

Stressing the need for an "inward and spiritual" disposition for our outward assertions is not as ethically sound as it might appear on the surface. The words in this case are not "mere" or "superficial." The words are very "outward" and very public and therein lies their chief significance. To stress some inner, subjective disposition as the proof of our promises, the validation of our words can be a way of weaseling out of the plain truth that "our word is our bond." Accuracy and morality alike confirm that to say, "I promise" means simply that, I do promise. To say it is not to state it but to do it. A new fact of life is thereby created, a new reality is added to the world—my promise. This reality may be ignored but it cannot be erased. A promise can be broken but it cannot be undone once it is done (spoken). It may be repented but it can never be retrieved.

The language of the service of holy matrimony is mostly performative language, the language of promising. The service is not merely some ceremony which may or may not relate to some other hidden or inward reality for which it stands. The service is the making of something new, the creation of a new entity, the doing of a deed, pure promise-making and little else. This is why little interest is shown, within the ceremony itself, in the manner dispositions or cognitive understanding of the
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promise makers. The promise itself, spoken aloud and in public, is the act of greatest significance.

Common sense alone tells us that things have value apart from whatever extrinsic worth we bring to them. A promise has an independent, intrinsic value and life of its own, apart from our intentions in making promises. Well-intentioned people can make promises. Poorly intentioned people can make promises. Our actions (including our action in making promises) have an intrinsic, objective import which situation ethicists, in their overstress of intentions, motives, and the ends of actions, fail to appreciate.

Admittedly, sometimes the church has acted as if all meaning and value were intrinsic in things and acts themselves—ex opere operato. Medieval philosophy of objective realism went too far in this direction, implying that our intentions, disposition, and motives mean nothing. But now, in our nominalism, in our stress upon individual feelings and subjective values, we must not go too far in the other direction. There is a mutual interplay between the individual and the reality the individual is making or confronting.

MARRIAGE AS PROMISE

Once a wedding is "done" by the exchanging of vows, the man and woman will never be the same. They have moved to a new life status by virtue of their promising. They can be widowed, divorced, separated, but they can never be unmarried. They may become estranged, but they will never again be strangers. An ontological transformation has occurred through their promising. They have a new identity which can never again be abstracted from this promising. The former "two" have become "one flesh." The promise of marriage becomes a new fact of their lives. That fact may be denied, ignored, or avoided, but it can never be erased. As Aquinas said, even God Almighty shares one limitation with us creatures: "Even God cannot make what is past not to have been." 6

This is one of the reasons that the 1976 United Methodist "Resolution on the Family" is so strange. After calling Christian marriage a covenant which is based upon "God's covenant with
Israel," it says: "The church recognizes, however, that in some cases the maintenance of personal integrity in the various members of a family requires the legal termination of this relationship through divorce."

But how can we use covenant language saying "two shall become one flesh" and then talk of "personal integrity"? "Personal integrity" would be violated if, indeed, "the two shall become one flesh." Besides, how can one speak of "personal integrity" without reference to those primary promises which a person has previously made and which are now the very stuff of a person's "personal integrity"?

It is pointless to quibble, at some future date, about whether the promise made a "real" marriage or not. It is not fair to claim that one lacked adequate understanding of the full implications of the promise, or entered into the vow with inadequate or questionable intentions. Such circumstances might make a promise more difficult to accomplish or put the promiser in a position which is more susceptible to surprises, but these circumstances cannot negate the promise. As the semanticists say, a descriptive statement ("I am married") may be true or false but a performative statement ("I take you as my wife") is simply a deed that is done. There are no such things as "real" or "unreal" promises, only kept or unkept promises. If a promise is made but not kept, it is not a matter that something was not a fact, not real, not true. It is a matter that someone's word was not kept. It is a moral matter, a breakdown in morality, not a breakdown in reality.

I fear that our psychologically infatuated society has put far too much stress on the virtues of premarital counseling. Premarital counseling, like premarital sex, may yield certain untested indications for the success of a marriage, but such prepromising activities tell us nothing essential about marriage. One can never know marriage except from inside the promise of marriage because, before the promise, there is no reality to understand. Like any promise, marriage is inherently full of risk—the risk of unknowing.

One of the difficult characteristics of all promises, those of marriage or otherwise, is that they have an inherently future quality about them. A promise is not kept until it is fulfilled. All
promising places the promiser at the risk of the future. If I say, "I will meet you for coffee at ten o'clock," I am promising to meet you in spite of what the future between now and ten o'clock may hold for me. My promise places me at the mercy of the future, indicating that I will so order my life between now and then as to keep my promise, come what may. For me to quibble over the way the future shapes up and then to advance this as a reason for breaking my promise is unfair. Promises which are contingent upon shifts in the future are hardly promises at all. To say, "I will meet you for coffee at ten o'clock—unless something else comes up" is not to make a promise (performative speech) but rather to describe my present intentions (descriptive speech). That little word if makes all the difference.

For the church to demand an unconditional, unreserved promise of fidelity on the part of a bride and groom—with no "if's" at all—is not only to make a theological statement about the unconditional, unreserved quality of love as the church defines love, but also to make a practical observation about the nature of promises. One cannot have control over a promise. One must put oneself at the mercy of it.

Of course, the future of some promises is rather short. I can promise to meet you for coffee at ten o'clock and, when I do, the promise is kept. It is fulfilled in one simple act. Some promises, however, are not kept in one simple act but require a host of acts, a lifetime of response and faithfulness to the promise. The church has sometimes referred to such lifetime promises as "covenant." Marriage is that kind of promise, a promise which is kept only by faithfulness until death.

A broken promise is just that—a broken promise. It stands out as a kind of unnatural, severed part of life. Like a limb which is severed from a body, its stump remains there as a reminder that something wrong and unnatural has occurred. When a promise is broken there is a major break in the parties involved, since the promise constituted the reality of who they were. There will be a feeling of betrayal, unfaithfulness, deceit, because something has been torn from the other person, something basic to life—trust.

To promise, particularly to make a promise like the promise of faithfulness in marriage, is to move ourselves to a new
status—that of a trusted one, one who is reliable, faithful, dependable in the midst of life's vicissitudes. It is to give and to receive a gift. Both the making and the receiving of promises are significant moral acts. In my promising is my exercise and enjoyment of my full and free humanity, an expression of my competence and creativity as a responding and responsible fabricator of life. The joy of marriage is the joy of giving and receiving a gift. Every promise, and the giving and receiving it entails, changes who I am. I find myself transformed, redone, converted in my promising. Perhaps this is why many couples report that, the longer and more faithfully one keeps the promises of marriage, the more unaware one is that one is keeping a promise. The promise becomes a natural part of who we are, so much so that fidelity becomes, not an achievement, but a characteristic of our lives together, part of our character. Perhaps that is why the church called marriage a “sacrament,” an indisputable “means of grace”—because so many receive grace through the keeping of their marriage promises.

My character is the result of my human capacity to determine myself beyond merely momentary acts. Character is part of my unique human ability to project myself into the future through my promises. This is the stuff of which true humanity is made. One who promises identifies himself as he is now with what he will be later. . . . The breaking of a promise would be a renunciation of himself, its fulfillment a holding fast to himself. . . . On this . . . depends a man's moral continuity in contrast to all nature and empirical instability; on it, therefore, depends at the same time the ethical substance of the person.

The order, stability, and character of my life depend upon the promises which I have made, and those which have been made to me, and those which I am still busy keeping. The world is held together by the web of our promises. This is why any union of man and woman can never be a purely private affair. It must be a social, corporate, public event because nothing less than society itself is at stake in such promising. Future generations will be dependent on our ability to keep our word, on the reliability of our speech. Is the church overstating the case when it claims, in
PROMISES TO KEEP

the service of marriage, that such covenanting has a cosmic, eternal significance? Is the church going too far when it claims, in holy matrimony, that in the quality of our faithfulness to these promises, our very humanity is at stake? Is it an exaggeration for the church to say that it sees in the act of love which is done in this man and woman a human mirror of the love with which God has loved us in Christ?

Many today are saying that marriage has had its day, that the promises of Christian marriage are no longer relevant. What they may be saying is, not that the promises of marriage are out of date, but rather that they are difficult. The courage to risk a promise, the fidelity to keep a promise, are more gifts than natural human attributes. The promises of marriage are far too difficult and risky for any one man or woman to make and keep on their own. Therefore they are made “in the presence of God and these witnesses,” as the liturgy puts it, asking the church for its corporate support and God for his love and grace for our marital union, confident that God enables what God requires, and that God’s grace is sufficient.

The recognition that marriage is mostly a promise does not answer all the pastoral questions which surround our care of married and formerly married persons, but it does tell us where our questions must begin. We are dealing with the difficulty of breaking promises.

She told me of his alcoholism, the problems that they had been through. “It hasn’t been easy,” she said.

“'I know it hasn’t been easy,” I said. “Why have you stuck with him through it all?”

She seemed surprised that I would ask, “You see, preacher, I gave him my word.”

NOTES

2. Paul F. Palmer, S. J., has shown how the promises of Christian marriage were transformed from covenantal promises to contractual promises. The trend today, since Vatican II, is to speak of marriage as a “covenant.” Palmer shows the positive
significance of this change. In this article, my concern is more basic: to show that the 
 promises of marriage, whether we conceive of these promises as covenantal or 
 contractual, share certain basic characteristics with other life-long promises. See Palmer, 
“Christian Marriage: Contract or Covenant?” Theological Studies 33(December 1972): 
617-65.
4. J. L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 
5. Edward Schillebeeckx, “Die Christliche Ehe und die menschliche Realitat volliger 
Eheerfahrung,” in P. J. Huizing’s Fur eine neue Kirchliche Ehereform (Dusseldorf: 
Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the United Methodist tradition—the theme of the conference held in February, 1980, puts in bold relief the irony of historical experience. Our newest worlds are sometimes in the past. This is as true for historians as it is for their audiences. It is as true for those who assume a history of national innocence as it is for those who celebrate a history of turmoil and resistance in the dramatic search for personal roots. In the United States today, both chauvinistic myth and family genealogy challenge us to test our present experience against historical evidence to discover what we have been as a people, as families, and therefore as persons-in-time, and in the process to discover new worlds. When seen against the pluralism of our diverse origins, a simple uncomplicated past of "Americanism" can become many pasts. When reconstructed from lifeless documents, the lost memory of persons, families, and peoples can place us in a living past of relationships and anchor us in time with the maturity that comes from self-knowledge. A richly textured historical identity can create a new world because it reveals something about ourselves that we did not know.

The women in United Methodist history whose work and ideas provided substance for the conference in Cincinnati created new worlds for themselves as well as for us. They are part of a new world for women who did not know their own

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past; a new world for historians who did not study that past; a
new world for men who, despite being sons, husbands, friends,
and brothers, did not know that they were part of this world of
women; a new world for men who, reading backward through
time, have been the oppressors, masters, and adversaries and
are now faced with a history which they, too, did not know. The
words oppression, master, and adversary are offensive, freighted
with disturbing emotions, but they express a historical reality
which confronts us as students and subjects of history, whether
we like it or not.

To emphasize the new world of women's history is not to
suggest that men should apologize for the past. That would be
no more appropriate than if the new world of black history had
elicited only a wailing confession of sin from whites. For if the
histories of women and black people teach us anything, it is that
men are not the subjects of women's history and that whites are
not the subjects of blacks' history. We are not searching for
guilty parties and scapegoats, any more than we are searching
for heroines and villains, although all these characters populate
the past in more than modest abundance. The importance of
women's history is not that men should know it—although they
certainly should; nor is it that historians who write books should
now mention "the ladies," because that is what they certainly
should not do. The significance of women's history is that the
injection of women into our historical consciousness demands a
rewriting of everyone's history.

Whenever we encounter new information about the past, we
must ask if the discovery essentially changes anything or
whether it merely underscores what we already knew. Probably
every historian has at one time or another daydreamed about
finding a lost trunk of letters, which when opened would almost
automatically revolutionize our historical understanding. What
most of us did not know is that we have had that trunk in our
intellectual attics for a long time and never have thought to look
inside. Historians of women, having pried open the lid, invite us
now to think in new terms, leading to new perspectives and
therefore to a new past.

The process of discovery begins in a formidably simple way:
Cherchez les femmes. Papers at the Cincinnati conference
discussed individuals, as well as women's groups, movements, and institutions. Some of the individuals explored were familiar to us as innovators, or as mythic figures of the Wesleyan tradition, or as both: Susanna Wesley, Frances Willard, Mary McLeod Bethune, Phoebe Palmer, Jessie Daniel Ames. The studies of groups and movements showed us how women have expanded their social roles by perfecting and diversifying their roles within the church. And the analyses of conflicts between women and those who resisted their movement into the latticework of power suggested the creative tension through which women frequently have been able to induce change. In this search for women, we have discovered who and what they were up against—men, yes, but in addition, habits of mind and rules of propriety which shaped their own consciousness and placed them at war with themselves. They faced not only flagrant abuse and the refusal to allow them to be the persons they wanted to be, but also myths and ideologies inadequate to enable them to understand the particulars in their own experience that prevented their articulation and justification of the persons they wanted to be.

The papers presented at the conference showed that women have faced the circumscription of their lives by ideas about appropriate role and place, but also have grasped the opportunity, when ideal female roles were self-contradictory enough, to create intellectual and psychological means of molding new models of thought and practice. In discovering the creativity of women in the process of cultural change, we also have uncovered the historical creativity of women in the maintenance of their own worlds, which have been closed to men and therefore to male historians. In the exploration of the past of United Methodism, as of other pasts, what begins as a simple search for women soon becomes the discovery of a complex world of human experience.

To understand this complexity, two things should be clarified. First, we must explain why we are making a special effort to look for women in history; second, we must explain why this enterprise will teach us something new about all human experience—why women's history is everyone's history.
The most obvious reason for studying women in history is that they are there. The problem has been, however, that despite their presence, historians did not see them. They saw Queen Elizabeth, to be sure, and perhaps Martha Washington. They remembered a few women who agitated for reform and equal rights and eventually, the vote. They could even recall the exceptional women who were either so outrageous or so effective that no one could ignore them. Victoria Woodhull and Carrie Nation were always good for a laugh, and we all recognize the public images of Frances Willard, Susan B. Anthony, and Eleanor Roosevelt. (As a child, I can remember thinking that Susan B. Anthony must have been important because, like my father, she had a middle initial.) But historians saw these very visible women from the perspective of those who possessed power—that is, those who were in a position to change the course of events. Elizabeth Tudor was the perfector of her father's vision of the English state. Her sex was a matter of statecraft. Woodhull and Nation were fanatics from the vantage point of power and position, and Willard, Anthony, and Roosevelt were remarkable women who emerged from the anonymous powerlessness of "woman's place" to become part of the world of public affairs. In reality, historians judged women by how far they were allowed to come into the arena of power where most of the protagonists were men. Their accomplishments were evaluated by the extent to which they provided women with the trappings and appearances of traditional power. They never were seen as significant representatives and leaders of constituencies quite unlike those that composed the male political world.

If women were visible to historians, therefore, it was only as they entered the limelight of traditional power or as they appeared in close association with their husbands. Historians did not make a special effort to seek out other women, since they already saw all those who were important. The vast majority remained invisible because they were not important—that is, they were not powerful.

What flawed this perception was that importance, like beauty
and evil, is in the eye of the beholder. To underscore this caveat, we need only recall that in the history of American religion, the full significance of Mistress Anne Hutchinson's challenge to the Puritan patriarchy was obscured for years by calling it the Antinomian controversy. Within the traditional framework of church history, which defined religious life and explained controversy in theological terms, this conflict was simply another example of the persistent tension between law and grace, works and faith, sanctification and justification within the Christian ethos. When it cropped up in 1636 in Puritan New England, the controversy became a dangerous challenge to public order, because in that particular society, theology was politics. Now this was of course true, but Anne Hutchinson's gender—with all its cultural implications—is as relevant in studying this episode as was the theology she espoused. Although her sex did not transform theological debate into a conflict over women's rights, it did underscore her potential threat to a social order authenticated in part by the subordination of women. The identification of Antinomianism with issues of sexuality and with the confusion of women's traditional role even before the Great Migration to Massachusetts, suggests that the heresy was always more than a dispute about grace and works. Once the contagion spread beyond Hutchinson's intimates, both men and women heretics were attacked for behaving in ways unnatural to their sex. The "unnaturalness" of their behavior was so much at odds with traditional views of status and power that Hutchinson's accusers charged her and another woman with having given birth to monsters, an indisputable evidence of the demonic.† The Antinomian debate was not, therefore, just a disagreement about theology, but a dispute concerning a social order maintained by strict rules of behavior associated with sex, by patterns of deference associated with social rank, and by orthodox religious views which favored communal solidarity over individual expressiveness. Anne Hutchinson's rebellion could never be fully understood until her sex became as important to historians as it had been to Puritans.

Since historical perception is so susceptible to mythic and ideological shading, the not-so-simple search for women in our
past has been necessarily propelled by developments in politics as well as in scholarship—specifically, by the movements for the liberation of blacks and women, and the development of a new social history which has tried to free the historically “inarticulate” from their traditional anonymity. Pushing back cultural and social restrictions on the free development of black people, the first movement challenged the history whites had written about them. Blacks did not want to be integrated into a white culture more concerned with its retrospective guilt than with the historical experience of Afro-Americans. They did not want to be integrated into a white-defined history which demanded that they accept slaveholders such as Thomas Jefferson and George Washington as their heroes. On the basis of their own experience, they could not believe that blacks had been only the victims and never the formulators of history. They found, in sources as open to whites as to themselves, that black people had developed experiences and heroes of their own. They found that their history reached back into Africa, grew through the struggles of Richard Allen and Frederick Douglass, and unfolded in the words of James Weldon Johnson, Richard Wright, W. E. B. DuBois, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr.² It was a new history which defined a people. The 1960s witnessed a powerful emotional bonding with a new past—new not in the sense that it had just been created, but that it had just been discovered. Once the political point was made and the excitement of discovery communicated, this new world of black history was offered to all, challenging us to seek all people who were invisible to traditional history.

The movement for women’s liberation, rising out of the social upheaval of the 1960s, had much in common with the black liberation movement; the social experience of the two groups was in some ways analogous: Both blacks and women, insists William H. Chafe, have had to deal with the imposition of social controls by white men; both have been assigned subservient positions according to ascriptive characteristics. The race and class privileges of white middle-class women did partially sedate them from feeling wronged, to be sure; but like blacks, they have been subject to the physical intimidation, economic control, and psychological power of white men who set limits on
their activities. Inside these limits, women were taught values which reinforced their own sense of propriety within this subordinate position. Long-term changes in education, employment, economic distribution, and sexual behavior, which reached a critical mass in the 1960s, undermined these limits, however. Then women began to ask: In what ways are we a group like other groups? How are we bonded together as women? How do we think of ourselves? How _should_ we think of ourselves, and what keeps us from being who we want to be? To answer these questions, they began to study their culture, their psychology, their roles in the economy, and their past.

Women discovered their past at a time when an increasing number of United States historians were beginning to participate in a modest movement of their own. Today this group is writing a "new social history," characterized by an interest in everyone's history. They have been influenced and emboldened by the impressive work of French and British colleagues to study the way people actually lived in the past. That this is an innovation may come as a surprise to nonhistorians, who may have thought that that was what historians were doing anyway—but not so! Historians were writing biographies of famous people, analyzing the ideas of prominent thinkers, and tracing public political debate in terms dictated by politicians; we were dividing our history according to the years wars were fought, presidents elected, institutions developed (or destroyed), and laws passed. The limitations of this kind of history are suggested by the traditional view of the so-called Age of Jackson: "With the achievement of universal, white, manhood suffrage, America was now a Democracy."

Some people were left out of this history, and out of this "democracy." Indeed, _most_ people were left out. The new social history attempts to include them all. Although agreeing neither on method or theory, contemporary social historians in the United States do agree that we will never understand the past until we include everyone in it—the powerless, the dissidents, the deviants, the workers, the criminals, the saints, the elite, the poor, the rich—and establish their relation to one another. We need to know what divides all these people into aggregates, collectives, groups, or classes. Social historians are agreed that
we will not understand the past until we look at the evidence of everyday life of all the people, in petitions, wills, marriage bonds, church books, trial records, census reports, and tax lists. They are agreed that the framework of our past must be exposed by examining health care, birth rates, families—both internal structure and external place in the social system—and the nature of the population, its density, ecology, and volatility. They are agreed that collective behavior such as riots, strikes, revivals, and social movements is just as important as a political tract in expressing what people believe about themselves and about those in power. Since women's role, work, fertility, and behavior are so important to these new inquiries, it is not surprising that the history of women should have gained rapidly in adherents, quality, and recognition since the late 1960s.

In answer to the first question, then, we should make a special effort to look for women in history because they are there. We do not yet know very much about them, because they have been ignored; and the folly of this fact is being driven home to all of us both in politics and in scholarship.

WHY IS WOMEN'S HISTORY EVERYONE'S HISTORY?

The second question, Why do we say that women's history is everyone's history? requires a brief explanation of "everyone." The concept is familiar enough, even if amorphous. Indeed, its lack of precise meaning has made it so popular: "Uncle Donald, don't be a drag; everyone is doing it!" "Everyone says that I should run for public office to serve the people." "I don't see why you should stop me, officer, everyone is going over 55!" In a democracy, the idea of "everyone" conveys a commonality which justifies action and thought. Thus for many of us, "everyone's history" would be the attempt to portray the historical experience of all groups—the lambs as well as the lions, the rabbits as well as the foxes—as if their commonality would one day unite them all in an idyllic and vegetarian peace. But it is not commonality that we seek in social history, nor is it typicality or a reductionist personification of androgynous unity. The goal is inclusiveness: to count no historical understanding as authentic until all groups and beliefs are included in our analysis. To put the matter into
subjective terms, “everyone’s history” enables persons and groups to place themselves in the historical process without excluding others.

Women’s history, therefore, is not exclusive in retaliation for the tradition of male-oriented history, but aims for inclusiveness through the introduction of women into the historical consciousness of both sexes. This is currently being accomplished by studying women in three major ways—in the work force, in the private sphere, and in the public sphere. These are the large historiographical divisions suggested by the report on United States scholarship in women’s history submitted to the Fifteenth International Congress of Historical Sciences at Bucharest in 1960.*

Women have always worked, although they have not necessarily been honored or paid for it. Women’s history is showing that the modern assumption that the working woman is a recent innovation is false; so is the idea that work outside the home can automatically raise the status of women. Most of women’s work before industrialization was confined to domestic tasks, farm work, or the pursuit of trades within the home. After 1800, a few began to enter industrial production, but until 1850, half the women wage earners in the United States were in domestic service, from which they moved into other forms of service or into industrial production. Women wage earners prior to 1870 tended to be lower class, young, and single, enjoying “few opportunities for advancement or permanent employment.” Married women usually did not work outside the home, but when they did, “their jobs tended to be episodic and improvised.” After 1890, the pace of women’s entrance into the labor market accelerated, but their position continued to be marginal. Even when improvements in education enabled them to enter the professions, prejudice reversed the trend after 1920. During the Great Depression there was an upward swing in the employment of married women in the total labor force, but not as the result of conversion to the ideal of equality. “Women’s low wages and the extreme sex segregation of the labor force operated in favor of female work during a period of high unemployment.” In other words, women were valued as laborers because they could be paid less than men were paid.
Entering the wage-labor force, therefore, in many ways was no more beneficial to the status of women than had been their entry into the professions. Indeed, certain paid jobs came to be identified as women’s jobs, a fact which diminished the status of the jobs rather than enhancing the status of the women.

Perhaps the most important impact of women’s history will result from its sustained focus on the private sphere of “reproduction, domesticity, and family relations.” Women’s progressively greater ability to “control their own fertility is,” many feminist scholars believe, “one of the central facts of their history.” The technological, ideological, and personal ability to regulate the bearing of children grants women the ability to decide whether they want to be thought of primarily as baby-making machines. The new capacity of social and women’s historians to see this as a problem helps them in turn to appreciate that issues of power—the ability to control events—are not issues of electoral politics alone, but of domestic life as well. To take an example from religious history, the traditional debate between freewill Arminians and predestinarian Calvinists never so clearly defined the issue of freedom in the historical process as has the problem of birth control. The sovereign will of Almighty God in directing his mysterious providence has never seemed so restrictive of helpless human beings as in the condemnation of women across the centuries to unwanted pregnancy and the terrors of disease and death. In recent history, however, women have learned to control their bodies and, in that sense, their fate.

Studies of birth control, and changing birth rates and marriage patterns reveal that the framework of human reproduction has shifted dramatically since 1800. Accompanying this change for much of the nineteenth century was the Victorian ideal of sexual restraint, which has been interpreted in widely different ways—as opportunity for women to be more free of biological motherhood; or as a restriction of their ability to express and celebrate their inner selves. Whether formulated consciously or not, the Victorian ideal helped to shape an ideology through which women could assume responsibilities they had not had previously. Most dramatic may have been the shift from father to mother of the responsibility for raising children, a change
which put women, especially in middle-class households, in a position of control over future generations. The mother increasingly became the conduit of civilization. Gradual though it was, this shift altered the way women could be seen and the way they would think of themselves, away from being men's "helpmeets or ornaments," the position to which they had been consigned in the previous century. Against this background, the responsibilities of motherhood ceased to be a mere extension of the responsibilities of wifehood and became, in addition, an avenue for women's development of a sense of autonomy and self-esteem.

Tracing such change in the past reveals that what today's traditionalists believe to be basically natural because it is biologically established, in reality is created by historical circumstances. That is, by the nineteenth century, the identification of women primarily as mothers ceased to lie in the biological fact of their giving birth and came instead to rest on a fabric of ideas that explained the meaning of motherhood and its requirements of women—to be nurturers, teachers, religious preceptors.

Acceptance and eventual perfection of these roles within the family helped women change their role in society, the third major area of study in women's history today. The Victorian ideal of motherhood did not necessarily restrict the activity of women to the domestic sphere. When they encountered things in the world that they would never have allowed in their homes, they began to organize to expand their control. The ideas they tried so hard to teach their children were very frail indeed, when compared to the tastelessness, injustice, and vice of the public sphere. But rather than cowering in their cages like frightened canaries, they launched out into new forms of social activity—not all the women and not all at once, but gradually and with considerable success by the early twentieth century.

Many of the papers presented at Cincinnati demonstrated the political astuteness and persistence of the new women who were determined to make their world a better place to live, just as they created order in their homes. Through social work, reform agitation, and political lobbying, women enlarged their sphere by making themselves into a militant public constitut-
ency, with leaders, strategists, tacticians, and troops. To be sure, the women’s clubs, missionary societies, temperance unions, and mothers’ associations were not especially radical by today’s standards; and reformers could not, even as suffragists, strike a deathblow to the persistent strain of inequality, prejudice, and discrimination in American life. But feminist and nonfeminist women alike were attempting to define the meaning of womanhood and to create among women a sense of social solidarity which would be personally satisfying and publicly beneficial. They were attempting to create a world that would be better for women as a whole.

If women’s history can help to provide a collective identity for women, we might conclude that that would be its only impact, and that women’s history therefore is socially divisive, separating women from men. If this were true, it would make absolutely no sense to link women’s history with everyone’s history. But one of the fundamental contributions of women’s history is to add gender as an essential part of our historical consciousness—in work, in the private sphere, and in the public arena. One of the results of this innovation could be the examination of all forms of work to see whether they have been sex specific by virtue of real biological differences or because of culturally imposed constraints. Or, consider the historical analysis which has stripped motherhood of its credibility as a biologically defined status. Women’s history has raised questions concerning many of our common assumptions about gender roles. Are they based on ideas we can change, rather than on immutable “givens” which we cannot? Or, if we probe the private sphere of the family with as much concern for male behavior as for female, and if we pay special attention to all the possible matrices of interaction, we may possibly begin to understand the real significance of placing sex and the family in history. The study of women’s history, in other words, opens new possibilities of historical research which may elicit the response from both sexes: I can see myself in this history!

There is something else that should be considered in evaluating the impact of women’s history upon our historical consciousness in the United States and in evaluating the importance of the Women in New Worlds conference. Let me
illustrate by sharing with you part of my own intellectual biography. For a number of years, I have been studying the way religion has affected southern society in the United States. As preparation for a book on this topic, I accepted an invitation to write a preliminary interpretive essay, which has been published as Religion in the Old South.9 Previous study of church records had shown the significant role played by local churches in the organization of society beyond the family and the kinship systems of the early republic. These churches—most of them evangelical—extended the emotional bonds of kinship into a community of people who belonged to one another not only by geographical proximity or economic position, but also by a common commitment to specific behavior patterns, goals, and ways of explaining self and God. In acknowledging this commitment, evangelicals self-consciously had rejected certain beliefs and ways of doing things, and in so doing had established invisible but nonetheless substantial boundaries between themselves and other people. In the process of historical elaboration, my perception of these religious folk became fairly abstract; their experience became sometimes elusive. It was essentially disturbing, because there was something in this record that was easy to see, but not easy to understand. A fair majority of church members were women. Whether in Alabama or South Carolina or Virginia, about 64 percent of each congregation was female.

But in the words of the anonymous sage, So what? Lists of names scribbled in an almost indecipherable hand on paper bleached yellow by time and dust can have a depressing effect. There was nothing self-evident about the lists; they represented completely anonymous people, scarcely visible at all except for their names. And it was very simple to leaf through the records and ignore the names; in fact, I had read one set of records three times, over a period of ten years, before I took any notice of the names and therefore of the women. Christian and family names were then checked and traced, defining family ties, seeking them out in census lists and tax receipts. Had the women come alone into the church? Or had they led their families? Were they the dutiful daughters of pious parents? Or were they courageous if mild dissenters who entered the church for
support and self-esteem? It was not as important, however, that I find answers to all my questions as that I had been arrested by the presence of women in the first place; that I had been compelled by some change in perception, by some insistence of the social historians, to look at everyone—especially at those who are difficult to recognize. Eventually, with the aid of literary sources, it became easier to see these women, first in the context of kinship and then of female bonding. Gradually, it became clear that women were the very people through whom the churches were established. And gradually, the fact which their names on church lists had suggested in the first place became obvious: churches were organizations of women. No more than Anne Hutchinson’s Antinomianism should have concealed her sex, should the fact that churches were religious organizations have obscured their significance as female organizations.¹⁰

What was true in explaining the social constitution of local churches is also true in explaining the sweep of American history: The obvious presence of women must affect the way we understand our past. Women’s organizations, whether specifically religious or not, have been the channel through which the private sphere of the home became part of the public sphere. But the role of women’s organizations in the process has been ignored because of traditional infatuation with electoral politics. If, however, this bias were to be complemented by studying the gradual entry of women into the public life of our society, with their domestic-oriented subculture accompanying them, we might begin to perceive a new history which has affected everyone.

For the sake of argument, we could call the process feminization, a concept which Barbara Welter identified with change in nineteenth-century American religion, and which Ann Douglas identified with the sentimental impoverishment of nineteenth-century American culture.¹¹ Without either the religious or the pejorative connotations, however, the process could well be identified as the impact upon our public life of changes in women’s institutions, consciousness, and action. The beginning of this long process is suggested by Mary Maples Dunn, who has pointed out that during the middle years of the seventeenth century in New England, women became the
preponderant constituency of the church population "even after their attempts to share in governance were defeated and male membership shrank." The explanation, Dunn argues, may reside in the conclusion of anthropologists that "all societies tend to esteem male roles more than female ones," to judge male action as a matter of public importance and female action as a "domestic matter, carrying less status." Anne Hutchinson's challenge had revealed a serious conflict over social goals, resolved in part by assigning "one set of goals to men and another to women." In this conflict, the clergy had resisted "all claims to lay prophetic power" and gradually had "enjoined silence on the men." By the end of the seventeenth century, men were moving out of the church and the clergy was defining the church through celebration of virtuous and Christian women. A new role for women seems to have been created: They "became the keepers of the covenant and protectors of the idea of mission. Put historically, women accepted the burdens of the past, and men the burdens of the future. Put politically, gender differentiation could in this way be seen as a stage in the separation of church and state." 12

Dunn's insight and her imaginative restatement of the process traditionally called "separation of church and state" suggest one significant way in which women's history can become everyone's history. The institutionalization of separate spheres achieved by the late eighteenth century has persisted throughout United States history, but through major changes in the roles of middle-class women, it also has provided a social base from which to bring the two spheres closer together. These changes and the institutional arrangements associated with them can be limned as falling into five hypothetical periods: 1780-1820, 1820-1880, 1880-1920, 1920-1960, and 1960 to the present. The first period after institutionalization of the private and public spheres could be called that of "Republican motherhood," when the role of the mother as nurturer, teacher, and moral preceptor in the homes of the new American republic supplanted the rule of the father. 13 In her domestic sphere, the mother assumed a public role by shaping the next generation of citizens and teacher-mothers. Developments during the second period, from 1820 to 1880, did not negate the maternal ideal
projected in the first, but added to it the ideal of “reformist motherhood” as women enlarged their sphere of home and church through missionary societies and moral reform societies, beginning to impose their ideals upon the reluctant world of male business and politics. In the third period (1880 to 1920) a new set of roles which we may refer to as “political motherhood” was characterized by the increased activity in reforming society through such organizations as the Y.W.C.A., W.C.T.U., settlement houses, and social reform agencies, as well as in demanding the vote through the National American Woman Suffrage Association and the suffrage movement as a whole. The next change took place between 1920 and 1960 in the world of work outside the home. This shift in the experience of women was also additive, rather than completely transformational. Women who were mothers began to enter the paid labor force in ever greater numbers. Against the background of past achievements and cumulative changes in the technology and ideology of birth control, this change enabled women in the dissenting culture of the 1960s to divorce both their private and their public roles from motherhood altogether.

The trend through these two hundred years has been for women to move out from the private sphere in stages. The impact upon women has been to produce a crescendo of sensitivity to their “rights.” The impact upon public life in the United States has been to bring the values of traditional Protestantism into the public sector by applying the values of the domestic sphere to the public sphere. This process has not been characterized by radical changes; that is not the essence of cumulative process. And to be sure, in each stage, a relatively small number of women moved through the dynamic of introducing the values. In each stage, vanguards urged further advances than constituencies were willing or able to make, and activists could be distinguished from those who wished to remain in what were for them perfectly acceptable positions. It could be argued, however, that even those “places” were further advanced than previous places for women had been. In each of the five stages, male reformers were obviously active in the new synthetic sphere of public-domestic activity, but unlike men in traditional electoral politics, they had a constituency of
women activists who were using the tools of the home—moral suasion, influence, and what could be called "nagging"—to get things done. This constituency of women, developing over a long period of time, may have been the crucial social fact upon which a reform tradition could be built.

The implications of this way of looking at the entire reform tradition in the United States can be suggested by a brief glance at progressivism, which often has been explained through studies of men. If the focus is shifted to women, our understanding of the progressive experience is altered and enriched. Moreover, the issue of woman suffrage is placed in its appropriate historical context. Women suffragists recently have been criticized for extending the privatistic categories of home and motherhood into their politics in order to justify enfranchisement. There are good historical and logical reasons for their doing so; "home" and "motherhood" were part of their opponents' political lexicon which they could adapt to their own purposes. These evocative symbols were not boundaries of limitation, but the channels of opportunity. Winning the vote was part of a long and cumulative process affecting the whole of American society, and no serious woman believed it was complete by 1920; in the long process of feminization, it represented the penultimate entry of women into the public sphere.

In explaining woman suffrage, historians traditionally have placed it within the framework of progressivism. But for the sake of argument, let us reverse the categories and place progressivism in the framework of feminization. The switch makes sense if one recalls what progressives wanted. They wanted expanded social services or welfare systems: better health care, better penal facilities, better laws governing work. They wanted cleaner, safer, and more honestly governed cities, and they wanted laws to control business. They wanted woman suffrage as part of their vision of a perfected democracy. All these reforms are inherent in the American Protestant reform tradition, in which women had been so prominent over such a long period of time, and to which, indeed, women were indispensable. All these reforms were justified by an ideology based on motherhood—not biological motherhood, but cultural motherhood, an ideology emphasizing nurture, education,
instruction in values, and general welfare. In this context, temperance reform makes a great deal of sense because it was an integral part of the feminized moral imagination which saw "drink" as a drug-related problem and as a woman's issue, to use the jargon of a later day. If temperance is placed within the activist tradition of Protestant churches—which were, after all, organizations of women—it is easily seen as a basic part of the process of feminization and therefore scarcely as an aberration of progressivism.

If the hypothesis of feminization has any validity at all, the study of women's history will have revitalized everyone's history in the United States by suggesting a new historical perspective. To be sure, this historiographical trail is not Interstate 75, but it has a logic which should be pushed, and it would not have been pushed except for recent studies in the history of American women. The idea of feminization is not suggested without some uneasiness at its hyperbole. Possibly the major problem with the hypothesis is that it might replace the image of Big Brother with that of Big Mama. But it is necessary to introduce into holistic historical analysis the previously unevaluated role of women as a force in American history. The empirical evidence will not reveal its secrets to historians and to other students of society without a conscious search for women within the total ethos—the total ethos. There are no answers in history until questions are asked. The androcentric bias of our culture has prevented our writing everyone's history because we could not ask the right questions, those now suggested by women's history—not until politics and scholarship shocked us into awareness. Those of us who are not historians of women, as well as those who are, have had a new world opened to us. It reminds one of the Bible verse which captured the imagination of the Woman's Missionary Society of the North Carolina Conference in 1920: "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it.""18

NOTES

WOMEN'S HISTORY

2. Richard Allen (1760-1831) was a celebrated black Methodist preacher, the first to be ordained in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Following disputes in Philadelphia over white control of a black Methodist congregation, Allen founded the independent A.M.E. Church in 1816 and was elected its first bishop. See “Richard Allen,” The Encyclopedia of World Methodism, ed. Nolan B. Harmon, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974) pp. 90-91; for more details, see Frederick E. Maser, Richard Allen, The United Methodist Biography Series, pamphlet (Lake Junaluska, N.C.: Commission on Archives and History, 1975). James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) was a poet, teacher, and activist; in God’s Trombones, he presented the poetry and cadences of Afro-American Christianity in a vivid and powerful fashion.


5. Sicherman et al., Recent U.S. Scholarship, pp. 6-18.

6. Sicherman et al., Recent U.S. Scholarship, pp. 18-33, 33-47.


8. Sicherman et al., Recent U.S. Scholarship, p. 28.


10. It is true, of course, that men officially managed the local as well as the regional churches, just as they officially managed the black congregations of biracial churches. But this control did not necessarily mean that the organizations in their social bonding were “male,” any more than black congregations were “white” churches. See Mathews, ch. 5.


17. There are many studies of progressivism in which women figure prominently as social workers and theorists; e.g., Allen F. Davis, Spearheads for Reform: The Social
Settlements and the Progressive Movement, 1890–1914 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); Clarke A. Chambers, Seedtime of Reform: American Social Service and Social Action, 1918–1933 (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1963). But when generalizations are made about “Who were the progressives?” they are based on the background and characteristics of men.

HOMILETICAL RESOURCES:  
THE PSALTER AS PREACHING TEXT

BRUCE C. BIRCH

The lectionary in *Seasons of the Gospel* contains selections from the Old Testament, the epistles, and the Gospels, listed for each Sunday of the church year as well as for various other festivals and observances. For each of these there is also listed a reading from the Psalter, but these Psalms are almost never used as the basis for the proclamation of God's Word in preaching. If they are used at all it is as an act of praise to be read responsively at some point in the liturgy. Indeed, this limited use of the Psalter is encouraged by the parallel listing of selection numbers from the Psalms selections printed in antiphonal style in the United Methodist *Book of Hymns.*

The purpose of these resources is to suggest and encourage the use of the Psalter as a source for preaching (also for teaching, although the lectionary is generally seen in relation to occasions of public worship). The Psalms are a part of the canon of Scripture all Christian churches acknowledge as the foundation for our proclamation of the Word of God. As such, the Psalms should on occasion be the texts with which we wrestle in our exegetical and homiletical tasks of ministry.

This article will offer a brief theological introduction to the *Book of Psalms* and will be followed by exegesis and exposition of the selection from the Psalter for each of the five Sundays of Lent (Year B in the lectionary) plus Palm or Passion Sunday. Lent is especially appropriate for this exploration of the riches of the Psalms because like the passion of Christ the Psalms give us a glimpse of the whole drama of God's salvation. It is no accident

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that the passion narratives in the Gospels often draw upon the Psalms.

THE PSALMS AS WITNESS TO ISRAEL'S FAITH

In their popular usage the Psalms have been greatly oversentimentalized. To many persons the mention of Psalms evokes only images of the lonely shepherd poet on a hill, and the use of the Psalter is thought to be primarily devotional. It is difficult to find that sense of vitality in the Psalms which led Martin Luther to exclaim that "Psalms are all of biblical faith in a nutshell!" John Wesley found the Psalms an important source for stimulating new insights into faith and often used them in preaching.

The early twentieth century saw the completion of a revolution in our scholarly understanding of the Psalms which although largely unacknowledged in our churches sets the stage for a fuller theological appropriation of the Book of Psalms. This revolution is due largely to the work of two men, Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel. The great German scholar Gunkel (1868–1932) established that the Psalms could be organized according to type (or genre, form). These types reflected formal patterns characteristic of each, and these formal patterns in turn showed us something of the situation in life where that type might be used. Thus, for example, hymns of praise can be recognized by definite patterns which allow us to describe all hymns as a group. These hymns have their life-setting in the Temple where the congregation gathers for liturgies of praise. From Gunkel's work we can now describe most Psalms as individual or communal laments, individual or communal thanksgivings, hymns of praise, royal psalms, enthronement psalms, penitential psalms, songs of trust, salvation history psalms, or wisdom psalms. Each of these types reflects a setting or situation in the life of the community of faith and aids us in relating the psalms to our own experience.

Sigmund Mowinckel was a Norwegian student of Gunkel who carried his work further in stressing the liturgical character of the Psalter. He believed that with the possible exception of wisdom psalms, most psalms reflected some worship setting. In
fact, Mowinckel believed a large number of the psalms to reflect a great annual festival of the enthronement of Yahweh. Mowinckel's argument for such a festival has not received universal support, but his work has helped convince most scholars that we are dealing primarily with the collected worship materials of Israel when we study the Book of Psalms. Even the individual laments and thanksgivings deal with personal crises only as these psalms are shared and expressed in corporate liturgical settings. These individual psalms are not the musings of the shepherd poet but the collected wishes of a whole community of faith at worship, offering up their experience before God.

Growing from the work of these men and others we can make several observations on the character of the Psalms. First, the Psalms can be seen as a veritable catalogue of human experience. The whole range is present and often in brutally honest terms. Many of the Psalms seem to deal with the boundary experiences of life, from despair and guilt to unbridled joy. The concerns of both individuals and communities find expression here. But in addition the Psalms represent the bringing of this experience before God in the context of the community of faith. The description of crisis or joy was not an end in itself. It was an experience to be seen in relationship to God with the worship of the community of faith as the context for seeking the divine-human encounter. Unlike our own worship, this was not merely putting on one's best face. Anger, joy, vengeance, guilt, relief—all of life's experiences were allowed to be present (sometimes in what strikes us as raw form; see 44:23). Offering these experiences to God in the worship setting, priest and community often served to mediate God's Word back to human experience. Persons and communities thus received reassurance that God was with them in life's joys and struggles.

The faith reflected in the psalms is not that of the individual poet but of an entire historic community. Thus, the faith to which the psalms witness is shaped by the entire experience of Israel in encounter with God through a rich and diverse history. Out of that history a particular pattern emerges and is expressed in the Psalms. It is the pattern of the salvation experience of Israel and begins with the paradigmatic event of the Exodus.
God's deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt became a pattern for the facing of any crisis in the context of Israel's faith. Israel had been faced with a seemingly hopeless situation, brought up to the edge of the sea with Pharaoh's army closing in, but where there seemed to be no way into the future God opened up a way. Distress became unexpected deliverance, not through Israel's efforts, but through God's. Israel applied this pattern beyond that one historic moment at the sea. This pattern of distress becoming deliverance was applied in all experience, undergirding the confidence that God is always present.

Naturally this pattern is seen in Israel's worship as reflected in the Psalms. The pattern has three elements. All persons and communities experience situations of distress, expressed in the laments that make up the largest group in the Psalter. Distress appears in the laments as individual, personal experiences and as experiences of threat to the community or society. The laments are extraordinarily candid in their expressions of grief, rage, indignation, and despair. They are often concerned with the hiddenness of God and speak to God in what we might consider irreverent terms. With the exception of Psalm 88, however, all these laments move toward and express trust and confidence in God's deliverance.

God's unexpected deliverance is the second element of the pattern. Even in the midst of crisis the laments anticipate God's deliverance, and the songs of thanksgiving offer praise to God for deliverance already experienced. The hymns of praise offer general praise to the God whose attributes (Creator, Lord of history) make such salvation possible. Many times in these psalms the expectation of God's deliverance is related to the previous experience of God's salvation in Israel's history (e.g., Psalm 136). This act of corporate remembering in worship helps keep alive the expectation that "God is with us" even in seemingly hopeless crises. It is worth noting that Israel is well aware that the path into God's future may open up in unexpected ways. The form of deliverance hoped for is not always the shape of new possibility that comes from God. The trust is that with God new life will be possible even from the moment of worst crisis.

The third element of the pattern of faith is Israel's response in
community. A community that has known and acknowledged the experience of God’s salvation cannot live like other communities. What can it mean to be God’s delivered people? The Psalms show Israel struggling with this community response in both worship and ethics. Of course, the entire Psalter serves as evidence of Israel’s worship response, but some psalms especially evidence Israel at work keeping the memory of Israel’s history of God’s salvation alive. Psalms 136 and 78 are recitations of this salvation history and were obviously used on occasions when the community gathered for worship. Other psalms, like 24, reflect the festival processions and celebrations through which Israel at worship kept the faith-tradition alive so that it could bring hope to the crises of new generations of the faithful.

Israel’s community response also came in the arena of ethics, the living-out of faith. Many psalms (e.g., 15, 37) reflect the demands for justice and righteousness laid upon Israel as God’s delivered people. Royal psalms and enthronement psalms (e.g., 72 and 47) instruct the king on his role as the representative of God’s justice and remind king and people alike that it is God who truly reigns. It is not enough to bear witness to God’s deliverance; we are reminded in these psalms of the demand for faithful community.

Almost every psalm in the Psalter can be related to this pattern of faith in one of its three aspects. In the psalms one can find witness to the entire story of the faith of Israel. Furthermore, this pattern of experience continues to be central to the understanding of Christian faith based in the experience of the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Consider the following diagram of this pattern and its parallels.

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Distress → Deliverance → Community
Human Situation → New Life/Hope → Witness
Sin → Grace → Church
Crucifixion → Resurrection → Pentecost
Confession → Word → Dedication
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To speak of our human situation and the need for new life and hope which comes from God is to refer to a pattern in the Psalms
lying at the heart of Christian theology. Out of this experience our faithful response to God's salvation (our response coming after God's salvation, not in order to earn it) calls forth the witness of God's people in proclamation and service. The traditional terms for this theological pattern are sin, grace, and the church. This pattern receives its definitive shape for Christians, of course, in the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the Crucifixion, Christ takes upon himself all of the violence, alienation, and distress that characterize the human condition, and once again distress is transformed into God's deliverance in the most unexpected way, through the Resurrection. At Pentecost the church is called into being as witness to this salvation through God in Christ. In our own contemporary worship we often rehearse this same pattern by organizing our liturgies with confession of our human condition, followed by the proclamation of God's saving Word through Scripture, creed, and sermon. This in turn is followed by a call to respond through offerings, prayers, and going forth as agents of God's grace in the world.

It is little wonder that so many throughout Christian history have found in the Psalms a foreshadowing of the entire gospel. These writings reflect the experience of full humanity brought into relationship to God, and that is after all the whole focus of Incarnation. From prison Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

I read the Psalms every day, as I have done for years; I know them and love them more than any other book. . . . My thoughts and feelings seem to be getting more and more like those of the Old Testament. . . . It is only when one knows the unutterability of the name of God that one can utter the name of Jesus Christ; it is only when one loves life and the earth so much that without them everything seems to be over that one may believe in the resurrection and a new world; it is only when one submits to God's law that one may speak of grace; and it is only when God's wrath and vengeance are hanging as grim realities over the heads of one's enemies that something of what it means to love and forgive them can touch our hearts. In my opinion it is not Christian to want to take our thoughts and feelings too quickly and too directly from the New Testament.2

The exegesis and exposition of the six selections from the Psalms which follow are intended to allow readers to glimpse some of
the richness of Israel's faith to be found there and judge these texts as worthy of being preached.

Exegesis and Exposition of Psalmic Lections for Lent

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 28

Psalmic Lections: Psalm 25:3-9

Psalm 25 is an individual psalm of lament. It is cast in the first person as a personal prayer asking for deliverance from enemies. The laments make up the largest group in the psalter. This may be surprising to many, since we are accustomed to thinking of the Book of Psalms primarily as a book of praise. Psalms of lament follow a definite pattern. Most of the elements of that typical pattern are present in Psalm 25, although intermixed in an unusual way.

1. Address to God: This is usually very brief and can be seen in vss. 1-2a.

2. Complaint: The crisis which occasions the lament is identified. This is often in general terms to allow the liturgical use of the psalm by many different worshippers. In verses 2b-3 this psalm speaks of being put to shame by enemies. The complaint is often accompanied by a protestation of innocence or a confession of sin. In Psalm 25 this comes not with the complaint but later in vss. 7, 11, and 18.

3. Confession of trust: Before actually appealing for help the laments express confidence and trust in God, by referring to God's power to deliver, but in vss. 8-15 this psalm expresses trust in terms of God's covenant faithfulness and God's moral guidance.

4. Petition for help: This normally comes only after expressing trust in God and can be seen in 25:16-20, but some element of petition can also be seen here in the initial statement of complaint, vss. 2b-3.

5. Words of assurance: In some laments words of hope seem to have been spoken by the priest (compare 12:5), but this element is not present here.
6. Vow of praise: Most laments end with a vow to praise God but this is absent in Psalm 25 (compare 26:12).

Psalm 25 is clearly an individual lament, but its form has been altered by influences from the wisdom tradition. In the first place this is an acrostic psalm. Every verse begins with a new letter of the Hebrew alphabet in order. This was a favorite memory device of the wisdom teachers but introduces an artificial structure into the psalm. Many other wisdom influences are present here. The teaching and instruction elements of the Book of Proverbs are called to mind by emphasis on God's teaching and instruction, vss. 4, 5, 8, 9, 12. God is pictured more as the standard for moral perfection than as deliverer in vss. 8-15, but the appeal in vss. 16-20 is for God's deliverance. Clearly this juxtaposition of God's deliverance and God's instruction is important to understanding this psalm, and we shall have to comment on this later.

This psalm was probably used at an Israelite covenant renewal festival which some scholars think was held each year. Covenant is specifically mentioned in vss. 10 and 14. Many other verses use key words connected with covenantal themes: "steadfast love," vss. 6, 7, 10; "faithfulness," vss. 5 (where the same word is translated in the RSV as "truth"), and 10. The use of this psalm in covenant renewal may explain the bringing together of wisdom and deliverance themes, since covenant, particularly in Israel's later history, is connected both with the salvation history (Exodus) and moral instruction (torah).

Now that we have examined the entire psalm, what of the portion which is given in the lectionary for this first Sunday in Lent? It is difficult to understand why only vss. 3-9 were selected. Vs. 3 gives the last half of the complaint and would be difficult to understand without vs. 2. Vss. 8-9 begin the section which expresses trust in God's teaching and instruction but stops short of showing us the goal toward which that guidance directs us, namely covenant relationship, vs. 10. Vss. 4-6 show the psalmist's appeal to the Lord for guidance and mercy, and vs. 7 gives us one of the verses of confession. In short, most of the major elements of this psalm are touched in this selection, but vss. 2 and 10 should be added to the reading of the passage in worship and preaching for the sake of intelligibility.
The central theological focus of Psalm 25:3-9 is, as with all laments, a response to those occasions when God may seem absent or hidden, the crisis moments. The crisis in this psalm is the fear of being put to shame by enemies (vs. 2). These enemies are described only vaguely as those who are “wantonly treacherous” (vs. 3). Here the interpreter is given free reign to call upon his or her own experience of treachery. The term denotes less a specific act than an untrustworthy quality. By contrast God is to be trusted. The movement of this and all laments is from crisis to confidence, appeal to praise, despair to hope. From vs. 4 onward the reader feels an overwhelming sense of confidence in the Lord, and the focus shifts from one’s own trouble in vs. 3 to praise of God in vss. 8-9.

Several key themes are of particular interest in relating this psalm to the life of the church, especially in the Lenten context.

1. Over and over again the psalmist returns to the theme of trust in God. This is stated very directly in vs. 2 (“O my God, in thee I trust”), and it is hard to imagine preaching from this psalm without going back to pick up this verse. The contrast is made between the “wantonly treacherous” and those that “wait for thee” (vs. 3, compare also vs. 5). The impression is that focus on God gives stability and trustworthiness. Any other focus seems to lead to treachery. Thus, even the crisis which calls forth lamentation is not without hope for those who “wait for thee.” This, of course, immediately calls to mind the great line from the prophet in the midst of Babylonian exile, “they who wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles” (Isa. 40:31).

But how is this trust in God established? Normally the psalms of lament would call to mind the mighty deeds of the Lord as a basis for trust. Here God is acknowledged as “the God of my salvation” but the dominant emphasis is not on God’s crisis intervention but on the steady, sustaining guidance of God. God teaches faithful paths (vs. 4), manifests mercy and steadfast love (vs. 6), instructs sinners (vs. 8), and leads the humble (vs. 9). The emphasis is not on God’s power but God’s goodness and uprightness (vs. 8). One has the sense of a God present and known not only in the crisis moments but as an ongoing presence. The term which best describes this divine constancy is
"faithfulness." The Hebrew word "emet appears in vss. 5 and 10. In both places it should be rendered as "faithfulness." To translate as "truth" in vs. 5 suggests confidence in a body of divinely revealed doctrine when the emphasis is on the constancy of God's own self as a guiding, teaching, instructing presence.

Covenant is, of course, the context for experiencing this guiding presence of God as a source of trust. Vs. 10 is the climactic verse of this section which reveals covenant as the setting for our experience of God's "steadfast love and faithfulness." Covenant points to the community of faith in relation to God. This is in itself a revealing theme for a psalm which speaks of personal, individual crisis.

The Old Testament often shows a certain tension between the experience of God's salvation and the experience of God's community. In the theme of Exodus and the other dramatic events of the salvation history, emphasis is on the experience of God's power in the moments of crisis when the people are powerless to deliver themselves. But Exodus is followed by Sinai. In the theme of covenant (and also in creation more broadly) emphasis shifts to experience of God in ongoing relationship within the community of faith (or within creation itself). God is present not only in the moments of crisis, but can be known through the teaching and instruction of the covenant community. In this psalm the wisdom themes of the sages are related to the covenant, and the psalmist can hope in that covenant community to "know thy ways, O Lord" (vs. 4). The God who is known in covenant on an ongoing basis then becomes a resource also in the moments of crisis. The God of deliverance and the God of guidance are seen as one and the same.

This juxtaposition of themes is especially appropriate for the Lenten season. On the one hand Lent is a season when we are made especially mindful of our need for God's deliverance. We are called to offer up our personal distresses before God. But although our need for God's salvation is personal, it is never private. God is known in the midst of the community, and Lent is also a season for taking stock of the community's resources, particularly in reflecting upon the tradition of our faith through
study. The teaching and instructing aspects of our encounter with God are highlighted in this psalm and are particularly appropriate for the season of the church year. Our corporate experience of God in covenant community becomes a resource in our times of personal distress when we cry out to God for deliverance.

2. Another theme in this psalm is confession and forgiveness. Three times the psalmist returns to this theme. One of these is in the lectionary selection (vs. 7; See also 11, 18). The obvious importance of this theme for Psalm 25 suggests that in our seeking after God's salvation and God's guidance the proper stance is one of confession and repentance. The trustworthiness of God is not something we have earned by our own righteousness but something we receive only through God's grace. Before the steadfast love and faithfulness of God in the covenant relationship we can only confess with this psalm that we are sinners. There is much more to be said on this theme but the selection for the fifth Sunday in Lent is the great penitential psalm, Psalm 51. These themes will be better taken up in that context.

The two themes we have lifted up are trust in God and confession of sin. As we begin the Lenten journey toward our remembrance of Christ's passion, no two themes could be more appropriate. We are reminded of our own involvement in the sinful world for which Christ suffered crucifixion, but in this awareness of our own brokenness and that of the world we are reminded of God's trustworthiness. Easter follows Good Friday, and to trust in the Lord is to acknowledge even at the start the Lenten season that celebration of Christ's Resurrection stands at the end of our journey through this portion of the church year.

SUNDAY, MARCH 7

Psalms Lection: Psalm 115:1, 9-18

This psalm is a cultic liturgy of blessing. We identify psalms as liturgies when they display evidences of liturgical activity in their structure. Most often this is seen in evidence that material was to be recited antiphonally by choir, congregation, and
priests. In this psalm antiphonal material can be clearly seen in vss. 9-18. In 9-11 a choir, priests, or both appeal for trust in the Lord to Israel, then to the choristers or priests themselves, and finally to those who “fear the Lord.” This latter category is ambiguous. It could “just as well mean either the whole Yahweh community or worshippers of Yahweh of non-Israelite origin, who already existed in pre-exilic times.” To each of these summons there is the refrain, “He is their help and their shield.” The use of the third person may indicate that the priests make this response. In vss. 12-13 the congregation (note the first person plural) expresses confidence that the Lord will bless the faithful. In vss. 14-15 the worshippers receive the actual blessing pronounced by the priest, and in vss. 16-18 the congregation makes a vow of praise.

The liturgy reflected in this psalm is for the purpose of bestowing a blessing. “All important observances at the sanctuary ended with the bestowal and reception of the blessing.” In this psalm we probably have the closing to some festival observance at the Temple. The people make a final ascription of glory to God (vs. 1) and contrast God’s power to the ineffectiveness of idols (vss. 3-8). The lection for this Sunday does not include this statement on idols but moves directly to the appeal for trust in the Lord and the giving of blessing in vss. 9-18. This does leave out some of the dramatic contrast which this psalm intends. The inclusion of vs. 1 does, however, give us the theme of God’s glory seen in covenantal terms (steadfast love and faithfulness) as the basis for the trust in the Lord which is urged in vss. 9 ff.

This psalm also belongs to a small grouping within the psalter of psalms that begin or end with the ritual cry, “Praise the Lord!” (Hallelujah), Psalms 111–118. Psalms 113–118 are referred to in Jewish worship tradition as the “Egyptian Hallel,” and are especially associated with the observance of Passover where 113–114 are recited before the meal and 115–118 after the meal. The close association between the Passover tradition and the passion of Christ may help account for the presence of this psalm in the Lenten lections.

The theological themes of this psalm help us to reflect on the nature of worship itself as the act of the gathered community.
Additionally the final verses of Psalm 115 function for us in the context of the Lenten season as an early stirring of the Resurrection theme which will only be sounded fully on Easter morning. It is important to note that this was not the function of these verses in their original context but is suggested by the use of this Psalm in the context of the Christian liturgical year.

1. It is significant that this liturgy which closes the liturgical gathering of the people ends in praise. No discussion of the Psalms would be complete without the observation that praise is the basic mood of all of Israel’s worship. This is, of course, seen most clearly in the hymns of praise. But praise is not limited to the hymns. As we have seen in Psalm 25, even the psalms of lament tend to move from despair toward praise in confidence that whatever the crisis, God is with the worshippers. Many scholars have observed that praise seems to be the most basic category in the psalms.

For Israel the ability to praise God appears as the very meaning of faithful life. In fact, death is described in the psalms as the end of one’s ability to praise God. “The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any that go down into silence.” (See vs. 17; compare also Ps. 30:9; 88:10.) Praise is the quality that defines life. By implication, ceasing to praise God is to be as good as dead. Death was not a mere biological phenomenon. Anytime we are rendered unable to affirm and celebrate life we have fallen under the power of death. Thus, it is important even in the midst of crisis to be able to praise God. Praise breaks the power of death by affirming God’s presence in all circumstances; hence, it was crucial to Israel’s faith that lament always yielded to praise. Thus, it is appropriate to end with the offering of praise (vss. 16-17). Without the ability to praise there can be no hope, because there is no recognition of God with whom hope lies.

2. The second point is that praise is entirely directed to God. The subject is God in all the divine aspects. It is particularly important to recognize that praise brings together the two aspects of experience with God—God’s saving and God’s blessing. God is the deliverer in times of crisis and the sustainer in the ongoing life of faith. God is Redeemer and God is Creator. Both of these elements are seen in Psalm 115. When Israel is
asked in vs. 9 to trust in the Lord, the refrain speaks of the saving activity of God, "He is their help and their shield." The image is of God the righteous warrior who will aid us in trouble. But when the psalm speaks of God's blessing it is with reference to God as Creator. As the creation is constant, so too the one who creates is also with us to mediate blessing. "May you be blessed by the Lord, who made heaven and earth!" (vs. 15).

The importance of praise in the Psalms is that through praise the people acknowledges that the God who saves and the God who creates and blesses are the same God. Praise gives unity to our varied experience of God's grace.

3. The offering of praise is also an acknowledgment of dependence on God. Praise is the voicing of our knowledge that we are creatures of God and that our life as individuals and as communities (our blessings) is a gift of God's grace. This theme is seen dramatically in Psalm 115 with the emphatic refusal of the worshippers in vs. 1 to turn any of God's glory (the word could also be translated "honor") toward themselves. Glory is "not to us" but "to thy name." The emphasis on God as Creator makes clear the source of blessing—it is God (vs. 12-13).

Much worship in the American churches has been lacking in a strong sense of dependence on God. The church has been affected by the American ideal of self-achievement and self-sufficiency. Thus, many worship services speak more of self-congratulation than of praise. Such worship is designed to tell more of the congregation than of God. This may be seen in terms of preoccupation with setting, trappings, or style of worship. The danger of pride in such patterns of worship seems obvious. Praise is also not measured in the success a congregation has at attracting large numbers of people to worship. The temptation to promote one's own success is often stronger than the biblical call to acknowledge our dependence on God.

Biblical praise is characterized by humility and not pride. It points to God as the focus of worship and not to its own setting or style. It is oriented to acknowledge the greatness of God and not the achievements of the congregation. No matter how successful our group we acknowledge in praise that God's work has not reached its climax in us.
This psalm makes clear that only from the humility of praise are we truly free to receive God's blessing without the illusion that it has somehow been earned by our own greatness or righteousness. The Lord blesses "those who fear the Lord, both small and great" (vs. 13).

Although the praise of Psalm 115 seems to come in a time of blessing, that praise is also important in crisis, as seen in the laments, and for much the same reason. In crisis the offering of praise is our recognition that God is still at work, creating and redeeming. We cannot become self-centered in our despair or in our success if through praise we confess our dependence on God.

4. Note the creative tension between this psalm's acknowledgment of the limits of death and the participation through praise in the eternal acknowledgment of God by the faith community, vs. 17-18. Artur Weiser has stated this theme eloquently: "Though they are aware of the limits set to their life on earth and know that the dead cannot praise God, they nevertheless have a share in the everlasting praise of God and this also lifts them above the barriers of death." For Christians, especially when this psalm is used during Lent, this cannot help but foreshadow the praise of God which pours forth in our celebration of the Resurrection as God's triumph over death. Easter is but a foretaste of what is yet to come in the church year.

SUNDAY, MARCH 14

Psalmic Lection: Psalm 19:7-14

Psalm 19 is really composed of two psalms joined together with no transition whatsoever. Psalm 19:1-6 is a hymn of praise to God as the creator of nature. It is perhaps the most famous of the nature hymns because of the power and beauty of its poetry. Psalm 19:7-14 might be described as a hymn to celebrate God's law (torah). This type is, however, not properly understood as a hymn and might better be classed as a "Torah psalm." Its form and style are not as flowing as that of the hymns. The influence of wisdom literature with its tendency to proverbial sayings and epigrams is obvious. This, of course, results in a more choppy
style in which many individual verses are sayings which can stand on their own quite apart from the total composition.

Vss. 7-14, which constitute the lection for this Sunday, are also divided into two major parts. The subject of vss. 7-11 is the law and the virtues of obedience to it. Vss. 12-14 make up a prayer of supplication directed to God seeking forgiveness (12-13) and offering the words of this psalm to God in humility (14).

The real question is why these two very different pieces are joined together in one entry in the Psalter. It seems obvious that they did not originate together, so they must have been intentionally joined in their cultic usage. Some have argued that verses 7-14 were added as a corrective by a later Israelite community that was offended by the almost pagan celebration of nature in vss. 1-6. This does not seem likely. Vs. 1 establishes clearly that nature is regarded primarily as a witness to the creative work of God. Calling God Creator is quite common in the wisdom literature; salvation history is the missing element in wisdom. Wisdom literature often draws images from nature to illustrate its proverbial sayings. It is more likely that a later generation in Israel began to see God's creation of the torah as a great work to be valued equally with the work of creation itself. To place these side by side serves to emphasize the role of God as the provider of order, in the natural world through nature and in the community of faith through the law. Rabbis in later Judaism taught that if Jews cease to keep torah the world would slip back into chaos; torah has a role in maintaining creation.

1. We can now look briefly at the theological themes of each portion of vss. 7-14. The main focus is on the celebration of God's law in vss. 7-11. Six synonyms are used in 6-9 to describe the law. These six sentences each describe an attribute of the law (perfect, sure, right, pure, clean, true) followed by a description of some effect of the law. There is no obvious relationship of each attribute to its effect. The structure seems to be merely a device for listing various characteristics and benefits of the law, perhaps for purposes of teaching. The style here is similar to that of Psalm 119, the longest in the Psalter, where each of one hundred and seventy-six verses uses some synonym for God's law.

We misjudge this psalm if we think of these verses only as an
admonition to follow some mechanistic pattern of obedience to a set of fixed precepts. Torah is a more important and dynamic principle than Christians usually recognize. Our view of the law is often fixed by the New Testament picture of the legalism of the Pharisees. We must understand that Jesus drew upon richer concepts of torah within Judaism in order to oppose that narrow view.

What is torah? The answer must come on two levels. Torah does refer to the law of Moses, the fixed witness of the Pentateuch as a deposit of the faith traditions. But torah does not just exist—it is lived. Thus, torah also indicates the life-style of the covenant community. Covenant is the establishing of relationship between God and people. Law or torah is the attempt to pass on the wisdom of the community for the living of that relationship. The books of Moses include not only law codes but the narrative traditions of Israel's faith experience as well. Torah refers both to the tradition passed on and to the discipline of living out of that tradition. As part of a faith community with such a received witness, one is never left at the mercy of the present moment with only personal resources to draw upon. Surely this is worth celebrating, as in this psalm.

Note that in celebrating torah one is praising the God who is revealed there. The focus is still upon God who is the origin of covenant relationship, just as surely as God is the origin of the creation itself.

Obedience to torah is to be prized more highly than any other earthly goods or pleasures (vss. 10-11). Some scholars have been troubled by the reference to reward in vs. 11 as if obedience to torah were seen as the earning of special gain. It is not clear that this reference is to material reward. Vs. 10 seems to reject such tangible rewards as less valuable than the joy of relationship to God which comes through torah. The notion that reward in vs. 11 refers to the wholeness of relationship with God seems to be reinforced by the shifting of the psalm to forgiveness and absolution in vss. 12-13.

2. The prayer for forgiveness in vss. 12-13 seems to reflect the desire of the psalmist to be made worthy of the relationship to God which comes through obedience to torah in the covenant. This reflects an attitude of humility on the part of the psalmist.
who recognizes that blamelessness and innocence before God is not achievable by one's own efforts but comes only through God's mercy (vs. 13b). This theme is fundamental to the Lenten season and keeps appearing in the Psalms lections, with the culmination coming in the use of the great penitential psalm, Psalm 51, on the fifth Sunday.

In the supplication of vss. 12-13 the psalmist prays first for forgiveness from accidental offenses against God ("hidden faults"), and then for the assistance of God in resisting the commission of deliberate sins ("presumptuous sins"). There is a double dynamic here. Torah as law helps the psalmist to a greater awareness of unworthiness before God and the need for God's forgiveness. Yet the forgiveness and mercy of God render the psalmist more worthy and capable of relationship to God in Torah as the discipline of covenant.

3. Vs. 14 is a petition for acceptance of the psalmist's words by God. It is, of course, justly famous as a prayer in relation to the proclamation and exposition of God's Word. The words "acceptable in thy sight" call to mind the acceptability of various sacrifices before God in the sacrificial cult (see Leviticus 1-2), leading numerous commentators to suggest that this verse really offers the prayer of the psalm as a sacrifice of praise before God. It speaks with the simple confidence that whatever the skill with words or lack thereof, God will also know the sentiments of the heart and judge the acceptability of this offering accordingly.

The focus of this psalm on the law touches an additional note appropriate to the Lenten season. Lent is a time not only for taking personal stock, but also for calling to mind the resources of the community. To celebrate God's Torah is to remind ourselves of the tradition handed down to us by generations gone before. Study of Scripture has been common during Lent as a part of our preparation for Easter. We remind ourselves of the tradition of faith so that we might fully understand the focal event of God's victory over death in Resurrection. Liturgically our recollection of God's Word during Lent reaches its climax in the Easter vigil service on Saturday night during Holy Week, when the entire salvation history from creation to Easter is recalled. This psalm reminds us of God's written Word and our living out of that Word.
HOMILETICAL RESOURCES

SUNDAY, MARCH 21

Psalmic Lection: Psalm 137:1-6

This unique psalm has long been a favorite in the life of the church because it speaks with such moving eloquence of alienation and despair. There have been an unusually large number of musical settings for this psalm.

The opening of Psalm 137 is in the pattern of the community laments, but it does not follow the normative form for this category. Lamentation in vss. 1-4 gives way to a vow of remembrance in vss. 5-6, followed in turn by a prayer for vengeance in vss. 7-9. This final outcry is so harsh that Psalm 137 has been treated in the church as if it formally ended with vs. 6. Indeed, the lection for this Sunday includes only vss. 1-6. It is not possible to understand this psalm fully, however, without including the outcry of these last verses, and the question of their meaning and purpose will be raised at the end of this section.

What really makes this psalm unique is the particularity of its historical setting. It is perhaps the only psalm which allows us to identify the precise historical context in which it arose. This psalm is a response to the Babylonian Exile. In 587 B.C. a Babylonian army captured Jerusalem, destroyed its walls and the Temple, and carried most of the prominent citizens into Exile in Babylon. The evidence seems clear that the southern kingdom of Judah had contributed to its own fate by a national arrogance which looked back to a golden age of Israelite dominance that many in Judah were certain God would restore to them as God’s “chosen people.” The Old Testament prophets view the Exile as not only a catastrophe but also a judgment.

This psalm is a reflection on the despair and anger felt by the exiles in Babylon. Vss. 1-4 seem to be a reflection on the initial experience of Exile. The psalmist must still be in Babylon, for the vow on Jerusalem, vss. 5-6, indicates that the point of view is still prior to the return from Exile. In vs. 1 the psalmist remembers the initial weeping and lack of purpose in exile. The people in Babylon are immobilized by grief. This grief is focused on the remembrance of Zion, the mount on which the Temple was
built. The crisis of Exile is not just one of physical suffering but one of spiritual suffering as well. With the Temple in ruins the focus of Israel's faith is gone. What is to stand as the symbol of God's presence in the people's midst? Perhaps God is defeated or has abandoned them (see Lam. 5:20-22).

The spiritual crisis of Exile becomes even clearer in vss. 2-4, the story of a humiliating incident. The Israelites had hung up their instruments without the spirit to sing the praises of God in this situation. Babylonians taunt them by making them to sing the songs of Zion and to pretend joyousness. The exiles' response is a bitter one. "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" The implication seems to be that one cannot, that praise is impossible in this situation. There is considerable irony that this psalm suggesting that one cannot praise God in this crisis situation is included and preserved in the Book of Psalms, a collection of Israel's praises (even in the laments). Psalm 137 is a witness to the pressure of crisis against praise, but as we have seen earlier not to praise is to surrender to the grasp of death.

Vs. 4 is the key question for the faith community in time of crisis, and although it is unanswered in this psalm, there are other places in the Old Testament where response is made. The preaching of the anonymous prophet of the Exile whom we call Deutero-Isaiah represents one of the greatest outpourings of hope in the Bible. His prophecy is itself a singing of the Lord's song in a strange land.

Vss. 5-6 turn from the memory of a corporate experience to a personal vow on the part of the psalmist. The language shifts to the first person and the psalmist vows to remember Jerusalem and set it as his highest joy. It is a vow taken in strong terms, but it does demonstrate that in spite of the despair of vss. 1-4 not all hope is abandoned. Jerusalem is still worth remembering, an indication that not all hope in Israel's God is abandoned. Nevertheless, this sentiment is still focused on a distant place as if God cannot be present in Babylon in the midst of the crisis of Exile. It is possible that this vow indicates a personal determination not to participate in the mockery of God and Zion by singing in humiliation for the Babylonian captors. The psalmist would rather his hand would wither before touching the strings of his lyre (vs. 5) and would rather his tongue would
become immobile before singing in humiliation (vs. 6). Thus, the psalm moves from melancholy to resistance and in the final section, vss. 7-9, to rage.

What can we learn from this psalm? Why is it in the psalter? Why is it included in the Lenten lections? We will look first at the meaning of the exile image itself for us. Then we will turn to the role of anger and vengeance in the psalms and in worship itself.

1. We have not usually paid much attention to this biblical image of Exile because we have usually thought only in terms of geography. A few Israelites were taken to live somewhere else. But Exile was much more. The real catastrophe was the upheaval of cultural, political, and religious meaning. Exile was a calling into question of Israel’s way of life, her institutions of leadership, and her faith. Prosperity was reduced to ashes, the kingship was ended, the Temple was destroyed, and people feared that even God had abandoned them. All of the important centers of meaning had been thrown into upheaval. Forced existence in a foreign land is a physical crisis. Such exile without a sense of meaning which remains intact is a spiritual crisis as well.

In the modern church we have not often chosen to think of ourselves in terms of the Exile image. Even when we understand exile more broadly as upheavals in whole patterns of living, we still are reluctant to see ourselves as exiled. The theme of judgment experienced as catastrophe is a hard one to consider. Few wish to believe that such experiences will befall them, and even fewer wish to believe that their own behavior has helped bring such a fate upon them. Nevertheless, we do live in a time which carries with it the possibility of cultural, political, and religious upheaval. Cherished patterns of living and structures of meaning have been and will be overturned or thrown into confusion.

There are increasing signs that the unlimited consumption and general prosperity which most Americans have enjoyed will not be possible in an increasingly limited world. We live in a time when famine, nuclear war, and major environmental damage are all disasters that are possible in our lifetime. We live on a planet increasingly overpopulated, and on which many of those peoples who have lived in poverty are asking for a just economic
share in the earth's wealth. We live in a world where the rapid rate of change itself confuses us and alters our values. In such a world it is very likely that we shall go through upheavals that challenge our accepted patterns of life, meaning and faith. Robert Heilbroner, echoing many other secular voices, writes: "If then, by the question, 'Is there hope for man?' we ask whether it is possible to meet the challenges of the future without the payment of a fearful price, the answer must be: No, there is no such hope." In effect, we too face the possibility of exile. Ours will not be a geographic removal, but it will be a strange land unlike that we have known.

The great importance of Psalm 137 for us is that it tells us that the faith community has journeyed into Exile before, and it focuses for us the overriding question for the church in such a time. If our time shares much in common with the period of Israel's Exile then the central question for the church today is like Israel the question of the Psalmist, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" How can God's word be understood in a time when our accustomed way of life is coming apart?

To recognize this question in Psalm 137 as our question will turn our efforts to marshalling the resources of hope rather than the illusions of false optimism and pride. We might look more seriously at the prophets of the exile, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Deutero-Isaiah. Even more importantly we might consider in this Lenten season the way in which the cross itself relates to the experience of Exile and becomes a necessary station on the path to the hopeful proclamation of Resurrection.

2. Both Exile and cross have something to do with the facing of our deepest experiences of alienation from the sources of life, especially God. The presence of this acknowledgment in the faith community is an important subject placed before us by this psalm, but especially by its closing verses.

In vss. 7-9 rage finally overwhelms the psalmist. He calls to God for vengeance against the Edomites who helped in the sack of Jerusalem (II Kings 25:18-12) and against the Babylonians. The final cry is that terrible verse, "Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!"

Our surprise is not that such sentiments are part of the human
experience, but that such expression is preserved in the Book of Psalms, Israel’s book of worship. What role does this outburst have in the worship experience? Why is it here? This is only one of several psalms of cursing or vengeance which have always been troublesome to the church.

There is an important lesson on the nature of Israel’s worship to be learned here. We have already noted the unusual candor of the Psalms. The whole range of human experience is brought before the community and offered up to God. For Israel no part of life could be excluded from encounter with God. Worship was not the putting on of the best face in the presence of God. Even feelings and experiences of anger and rage and despair must be brought before God. The alternative was to keep these experiences to oneself, away from the nurture of the community, apart from the acknowledged presence of God. How can hate be discharged if we never acknowledge its presence? How can struggle be faithful if its existence is not made known when we gather as the faith community?

Vengeance and cursing of enemies were not approved by Israel. Vengeance is to take action into one’s own hands. A curse bypasses God to go direct to the cursed and do harm. In Israel these human experiences are offered up to God and held accountable by the community. To read of God, “Vengeance is mine,” (Deut. 32:35) is not to see God as brutal; it is to recognize a God who says, in effect, “Vengeance is not yours.” Even the most justifiable rage does not allow the taking of other destinies into one’s own hands, but to offer that rage up to God is to trust that God will accept even our humiliation and powerlessness, and it is to trust that in God justice will be done.

One may wonder where the justifiable anger and pain of the hurt and the powerless may find expression in our churches. Perhaps Ps. 137:9 is still too harsh for our taste in public worship. Yet we should not fail to see these outrages as a symptom pointing to the injuries of persons and society. We often condemn the outcry and not the hurt. By ruling out the expression of these dimensions of human experience, we make our worship a gathering of the comfortable and the meek. Is it not our reluctance to hate sin (brokenness) where we find it that allows evil to flourish and prevents the sinner (the alienated and
broken) from being redeemed? If our anger and indignation is misplaced or unjustified, is there any better place to be called to reconciliation or repentance than in the community of faith?

SUNDAY, MARCH 28

Psalmic Lection: Psalm 51:1-16

Psalm 51 is the greatest of the penitential psalms. These psalms are in many ways variants of the lament. They deal with a crisis of distress in which the psalmist cries out to God for help. The difference is that in the penitential psalm the crisis is spiritual. The affliction of the supplicant is not some external situation but a deep sense of one’s own sin and unworthiness before God. Most of the elements of the lament are still present: expressions of trust in God, petition to God, the movement from despair to praise. Missing, of course, is the protestation of innocence which appears in so many laments.

Vss. 1-2 open the psalm with an invocation which includes an initial plea for forgiveness. Vss. 3-5 are the confession of sin by the psalmist. Vss. 6-12 constitute a prayer of petition which falls into two distinct parts: a prayer for forgiveness (6-9) and a prayer for renewal and restoration of relationship (10-12). Vss. 13-15 shifts to vows of praise in anticipation of forgiveness and renewal, which are related to vss. 16-17 on the subject of sacrifice acceptable to God. Vss. 18-19 are a late addition to the psalm correcting the antisacrificial sentiments of the previous verses. The lection for this Sunday comprises verses 10-16, which starts in the middle of the prayer of petition and end after the first of the two verses on proper sacrifice. Obviously the lection poses some exegetical problems which must be reckoned with in our treatment below.

The psalm has an interesting superscription. It tells us that this psalm is associated in Israel with the story of Nathan’s confrontation of David after David’s sin with Bathsheba. This is one of the great biblical stories of confrontation and repentance of sin. One might wish to explore that story a bit in connection with preaching on this psalm.

The lectionary selection begins with the prayer for renewal in
vss. 10-12. It is not possible to understand these verses apart from their context following the earlier sections of the psalm. The prayer for renewal represents the final step in a description of the path of true penitence. The first step on this penitential journey is the acknowledgment and confession of sin seen in vss. 3-5. It is particularly noteworthy that the psalmist sees all sin as ultimately directed toward God (vs. 4) and that he understands sin to be basic to the human character (vs. 5). The contrast is important: before the righteousness of God one is sinful from the very moment of conception.

After confession comes forgiveness. Here is the action of God which we may receive if we but acknowledge our need for it. The verbs carry the power of this section: teaching (6b), purging (7a), washing (7b), filling (8a), causing to rejoice (8b), hiding (9a), and blotting out (9b). Taken together these form an eloquent set of images for God's forgiving activity. Even one sinful from birth can hope for the purity which can come only from God (vs. 7).

The start of our lection comes as a third stage in the penitential path, renewal. This too must come from God. Forgiveness wipes clean the slate but it does not change the sinful character of human nature. Human efforts alone cannot restore relationships broken by sin. Not only is forgiveness an act of God's grace, but the new heart and spirit (vs. 10) which make the moral life possible are from God. The degree to which we succeed in the faithful life is itself a gift of God and not the product of our efforts alone. To emphasize this the psalmist has chosen some unusual language. Vs. 10 uses the Hebrew verb "to create" (bara'). This verb is used in the Hebrew Bible only of God and never of humanity. Thus it is made clear that a "clean heart" and "right spirit" are works of God. This theme is also seen in Jer. 31:31 ff. and Ezek. 11:17 ff. and 36:25 ff. The language of vs. 11 reinforces this notion of renewed relationship as dependent on God. The psalmist prays for divine presence and the indwelling of divine spirit.

John Wesley was particularly fond of this passage on renewal and gave it a central place at the climax of his Covenant Renewal Service. It is included with lines from Psalm 51 on the confession and petition for renewal which precedes the vow of covenant. Wesley first used this service in 1755, and it has been an
important part of the Methodist tradition since. Wesley saw in the penitential dynamic we have described a reflection of the relationship between justification and sanctification, both of which were initiated through the grace of God.

After the prayer for renewal our psalm shifts to the giving of a vow of praise. Actually this vow includes the instruction of others so that they might also follow in the path of patience (vs. 13). The vow in vs. 14 is somewhat awkward. The term “bloodguiltiness” usually indicates an offense or crime which demanded death as the penalty. Hence, some have translated the phrase, “Deliver me from death.” This is surely not a prayer for deliverance from physical death. At least such a translation fits very poorly in the context. It is probably an indication of the seriousness with which the psalmist takes his own sin that he describes it with this term. It is a reference to spiritual death, from which deliverance is as earnestly desired as in any of the laments. Vs. 15 is an acknowledgment that even praise of God is a divinely initiated gift. It is striking that this common versicle of praise used in so many of our liturgies comes not from a hymn of praise but a psalm of penitence.

The lection ends with only one of two closely related verses on acceptable sacrifice. It is puzzling why those responsible for the lectionary would have included vs. 16 and omitted 17. The two verses are an intended contrast. The first is the negative: God is not delighted or pleased with sacrifice. This is a theme well-known to us from the prophets (I Sam. 15:22 ff., Amos 5:21 ff., Isa. 1:11ff.). Sacrifice as an end in itself is not pleasing to the Lord and does not produce righteousness. But here is where we need vs. 17. In the prophets there are various ways of identifying what is acceptable to the Lord: justice, obedience, faithfulness, correcting oppression. Without 17 we would not have the positive contrast of this psalm. According to 17 the acceptable sacrifice is “a broken spirit/a broken and contrite heart,” a troublesome phrase, since it often indicates a destructive overwhelming of someone’s independence and identity. This is not the meaning of the text at all. These idioms are indications of humility, the opposite of pride. They are attempts to express the acceptable sacrifice in terms that bespeak the very attitude shown by the psalmist in this penitential
psalm, an awareness not of self-accomplishment but of dependence on God.

Obviously, this psalm suits the Lenten season well. Self-examination and penitence are fundamental aspects of Lent as our preparation and making ourselves worthy for the celebration of the Resurrection festival at Easter. Two themes growing out of this psalm deserve brief highlighting in the Lenten context.

1. The concept of sin in this psalm is properly focused on relationship to God. This psalm is not concerned with sins but with sin. Nowhere is there any hint of a listing of specific moral transgressions to be legalistically negated by God's forgiveness. Specific acts remain in the background so that focus can center on the broken condition of relationship to God. Vs. 4 states this radically: "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned." This does not mean, as some have suggested, that the concern here is only with narrowly defined "spiritual" sins against God. It is simply that for this psalmist all sin, whatever its locus in human society, is ultimately a rupture in the relationship with God. This is the corollary of Jesus' summation of the greatest commandment as love of God and neighbor. So, too, sin against the neighbor is sin against God. This same focus on relationship to God is seen in the renewal section of our lection (vss. 10-12). Forgiveness and renewal must ultimately restore our relationship with God and therefore require God's initiative.

This centrality of relationship to God prevents us from trivializing our sinful condition and the path of penitence which leads to God. Penitence does not simply require conflict resolution or tolerance of pluralism or the stirring up of guilt. Penitence requires the humility that turns aside from self-justification and prideful master plans for renewal. Any call for renewal which does not begin in confession and take root in humility is itself an evidence of sin.

2. The motivating force behind this psalm is repentance rather than guilt. The Hebrew word for repent is shuv, which has as its basic meaning "to turn around." This word does not actually appear in Psalm 51, but the dynamic described is the very epitome of repentance. Repentance points to a changing of direction and new action. Although confession acknowledges the past, repentance is oriented to the future.
Many in the modern church come to an awareness of deep complicity in sin both as individuals and as the church, but instead of calling the community hopefully to repentance and new direction they settle for guilt. The call to repentance is not a call to become mired in guilt. Guilt is oriented to the past and paralyzes persons in regret for things that cannot be changed. Repentance is oriented to the future as an alternative to the past, and it empowers new response. Guilt is static, but repentance is dynamic. God’s forgiveness frees from guilt but calls us to repentance.

Psalm 51 with its movement beyond confession and forgiveness to renewal and praise can stand as a reminder that the season of Lent is one of repentance in preparation for God’s new future in Resurrection, and it is not a time of breast-beating guilt.

SUNDAY, APRIL 4

Palm or Passion Sunday

*Psalmic Lection: Psalm 22:7-8, 16-19, 22-23*

Almost from the beginning of the church this psalm has been connected with the passion of Jesus Christ. This psalm is particularly sacred to Christian memory because the cry of desolation which Jesus utters from the cross in Mark 15:34 is taken from the opening of this psalm: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Most New Testament scholars regard Psalm 22 as an important shaping influence on the Gospel passion narratives.

In the lectionary the Psalm reading (taken from 22 in both years A and B) helps to preserve the strange dual role of this Sunday in the church year. It is both Palm and Passion Sunday. The Gospel readings (Mark 11:1-11 or John 12:12-16) reflect the versions of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem which we remember on Palm Sunday. But this is also the traditional sabbath in long and ancient tradition for recalling the passion of Christ. If only the Gospel and Old Testament lesson (Zech. 9:9-12, plus Gospel readings) are read, our sabbath observance
moves from triumphal entry to the triumph of Resurrection without ever passing through Jesus' suffering and death. Churches may have a Good Friday service, but these notoriously involve few worshippers. The psalmic lection (and to a certain extent the epistle readings) hold the remembrance of Christ's passion before us and force us to contemplate the relationship of cross to tomb.

In structure Psalm 22 is a classic lament, but the element of praise with which many laments conclude is developed into a full song of thanksgiving (vss. 22-31). Many scholars have made the plausible suggestion that we should understand some sort of deliverance from trouble to have occurred between vss. 21 and 22, so that in its two parts the psalm is something of a before-and-after witness.

The psalm opens with an address to God (vss. 1-2), which shows us the crisis of faith accompanying physical crisis. Vss. 3-5 express trust in the Lord by recalling the past traditions of divine mercy. Only in 6-8 do we finally reach the complaint which speaks of the psalmist's trouble. It continues in vss. 12-18, having been interrupted by yet another expression of trust (9-10) and a brief petition for help (11). The full petition does not come until vss. 19-21. Vs. 22 suddenly turns to praise as if deliverance has already been experienced. The psalmist joyfully vows to sing God's praises in the congregation. He then summons first Israel (23 ff.), then the nations (27 ff.), and finally all generations past and future (30 ff.) to join in praise of God.

It is hard to identify the crisis which gives rise to this psalm because the psalmist has made such broad use of stylized language. He speaks of alienation, enemies, physical illness, or injury. His adversaries are referred to as bulls, dogs, a company of evildoers, lions, and wild oxen. Perhaps this has been part of the strength of this psalm in the tradition. The use of metaphor and poetic image have allowed generation after generation to see their own afflictions reflected here. To be sure, the crisis is comprehensive enough in this picture to encompass the full range of human distress. All levels of crisis are present: physical, social, and spiritual. Part of this psalm's witness is that these levels are often linked.

The lection for Year A covers the first eleven verses of this
psalm and thus focuses on the crisis and the psalmist's trust. The lection for Year B (our focus) is more fragmented. It includes vss. 7-8, a portion of the complaint, moves to vss. 16-19, a further portion of the complaint with one verse of the petition, and finally concludes with vss. 22-23, the opening of the song of thanksgiving.

The rationale for this selection does not seem to lie within a consideration of the psalm itself. The governing principle of selection seems to have been the gathering of verses which foreshadow or have been used in the Gospel passion narratives, with the exception of the cry of desolation in vs. 1, which is the focus for the Year A selection. Indeed there is a sense in which these scattered selections can be seen as a miniature enactment of the movement from passion and Crucifixion to Resurrection. Surely something of this movement was intended by the selecters.

The distress of the psalmist in vss. 7-8 focuses not so much on his physical plight (we learn later in 14-15 that he is in great physical suffering) as on the mockery of his adversaries who taunt him for his trust in God's deliverance. His enemies raise and help reinforce the very doubt that plagues the psalmist, namely the fear that God really has abandoned him in his trouble (vs. 1). These words of the psalmist's mockers cannot help but call to mind the taunting words to Jesus upon the cross in Mark 15:30-31, "Save yourself, and come down from the cross! ... He saved others; he cannot save himself." Our understanding of Jesus as God incarnate makes Ps. 22:8 and Mark 15:30-31 both statements of derision directed against the power of God.

Vss. 16-18 pick up additional elements of the psalmist's plight which have affected the Gospel passion narratives. The Septuagint, which was the Greek version of the Old Testament used in Jesus' time by many, read vs. 16c, "they have pierced my hands and feet." The early church saw here a foreshadowing of the Crucifixion. The Hebrew text does not support this reading but reads something like "My hands and feet are in pain." At least it is safe to say that at no point does this psalm seem to indicate that the petitioner is in fear of being executed. The picture is rather of opportunists taking advantage of a sick,
weak, and emaciated man (vs. 17). This includes the division of
his goods and clothing, no doubt in anticipation of death
(perhaps in premature payment for debts). This is, of course,
reflected in the casting of lots for Jesus' garments at the
Crucifixion.

To help us avoid a treatment of these verses as some sort of
mechanical foreseeing of Jesus' passion, our selection includes
the passionate plea for help in vs. 19 and the beginning of the
great song of thanksgiving in vss. 22-23, which indicates that the
petition to God was heeded and the psalmist experienced
deliverance. It is important to note that the witness to this
deliverance is in the midst of the corporate congregation who
have presumably also provided the context for the psalmist's
plea for help.

What we have reflected in this psalmic lection is a miniature
version of the drama of salvation outlined in the introduction to
these studies. Distress becomes deliverance and the community
responds in praise and in witness. Indeed it is in part the
community's witness which made trust possible for the
petitioner even in the face of grave doubts and fears that God
had abandoned him. This drama of salvation reaches its fullest
expression in the drama of Jesus' passion, death, and
Resurrection. It is fitting that we see reflected here both our own
experience in time of trouble and the passion of Christ. After all,
Christ's passion is also ours. It is the story of God in human form
taking on not an absolutely unique experience but the full
experience of suffering humanity.

This psalm reminds us that the only path to Resurrection faith
lies through the experience of Crucifixion. A theology of glory in
the Christian faith requires a strong theology of the cross if it is
not to become prideful and triumphalist. But this is also a part
of the entire impact of these psalms on our Lenten preparation
for the Resurrection celebration. We dare not come to Easter too
soon, too cheaply, or without preparation. All the themes we
have touched upon are part of that preparation which keeps the
tomb from becoming the symbol of cheap grace, victory without
cost. Repentance, the dynamics of praise, the renewal of
covenant, the contemplation of Torah, the acknowledgment of
our crises and despairs—these and many other themes remind
us that Lent is the costly preparation which allows us with Christ to pass through death to new life and to move toward Pentecost and our calling to become the Resurrection community, the church.

ADDITIONAL READING

The following works have been especially helpful to me and are recommended for further study of the Psalms.


3. Unless another translation of the author's own is indicated the basic English text used will be the RSV. Lections are taken from Seasons of the Gospel: Resources for the Christian Year (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).
BOOK REVIEWS

FREUDIAN THought AND RELIGION:
THREE NEW STUDIES

Reviews by Jeff Hopper


These three short books deal with the relationship of Freudian thought to religion, and all the authors affirm—to a significant degree—a Freudian understanding of persons. Nevertheless, the three books are very different from each other in their aims and emphases. One is by a theologian (Hans Küng) who offers a critique of Freud’s atheism and an affirmation of Freud’s importance for church and theology. The other two are by Freudian analysts, two of whom (Dolto and Sévérin) collaborate to offer a psychoanalytic interpretation of Jesus and the Gospels. The third (Rizzuto) presents a study of the origin and development of individuals’ representations of God. Although the first two books are written from the standpoint of belief in God, the third expressly disavows concern with the question of the reality of God. In the judgment of this reviewer it is the third book (Rizzuto’s) which offers the most help for ministry and theology.

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Freud and the Problem of God is a translation of a portion of Küng's Existiert Gott? It is also the published form of Hans Küng's 1978 Terry Lectures at Yale University. Küng seeks to trace the origins of Freud's atheism, explicate Freud's theories on the origin and nature of religion, offer a critique of Freud's arguments against the existence of God, and point out some lessons the churches should learn from Freud.

In the first chapter Küng argues that Freud made "the transition to atheism" because, like many of the intelligentsia of the late nineteenth century, he developed "an infinite reverence" for natural science. There is much evidence for such "scientism" in Freud, but not for this so-called "transition." Küng uses the term transition to reject the judgment (which was, in fact, Freud's own) that Freud never believed in God. (Freud's view here, if correct, would undercut Küng's derivation of Freud's atheism.)

Küng also places questionable and oversimplifying emphasis on the role of Feuerbach in the background of Freud's atheism. Küng's point is that "Freud's atheism was not grounded in his psychoanalysis, but preceded it" (75). This conclusion is not dependent on the Feuerbach hypothesis, and it is hardly a new finding, for as Küng notes, Freud himself made this point.

Before he makes this judgment, Küng offers a brief introduction to the development of Freud's psychoanalytical theories (too brief to clarify very much for the uninformed, too general to add anything helpful for those who have studied Freud's thought). Then he sets forth the theory which Freud developed concerning the origin of religion in the Oedipus complex (chap. 2). Considerable attention is devoted to Freud's views of religion as illusion and wish-fulfillment and its opposition to reason and science. This prepares the way for both Küng's critique of Freud's conclusions (chap. 3) and Küng's critique of the churches on Freudian grounds (chap. 4).

The critique of Freud's conclusions includes a discussion of the views of Adler and Jung, a discussion which begins with the remarkable and unsound judgment that it is in "the complex of problems relating to religion" that both men differ essentially from Freud (61). That statement would be less misleading had not Küng preceded it by listing some of the more basic contrasts between the theories of each of these men and those of Freud as being
unimportant for this allegedly essential difference about religion. Although the back cover of the book highlights the comparison of these three men’s views on religion, the treatment of Adler’s views is superficial, and that of Jung’s is misleading and in part mistaken. (The attempt to summarize Jung’s views concerning religion without any discussion of the “collective unconscious” is indicative of how little Küng is familiar with Jung’s work.) The comparison is concluded by Küng’s assertion that neither Adler nor Jung has answered Freud’s fundamental question, namely, whether religion may not be “merely wishful thinking.” Each of them did, in fact, answer this question from his own point of view.

Küng next points out that neither in Freud’s time nor since have the studies of the relevant specialists supported Freud’s theories about the origin of religion. He then turns to Freud’s atheism, emphasizing that it must finally “be seen as a hypothesis which has not been conclusively proved” (76, Küng’s italics). He acknowledges that “Freud was well aware of this,” and that “religious ideas, though incredible, are for him irrefutable” (80). The argument is thus not directed against Freud, but against those who may believe that Freud showed religion to be false.

The final suggestion of this chapter is that Freud’s atheism may have been his own repression of “a Jewish religiosity” (84-88). This attempt to turn Freud’s theories back upon him may have some validity, but it is given too little basis here to be taken seriously.

In the last chapter Küng seeks to affirm the importance for the churches of Freud’s discoveries and of Freud’s courageous pursuit of truth. It would appear that what is reflected here is Küng’s own struggle for freedom within the Roman Catholic Church. One’s admiration for him in this struggle does not alter the fact that his points here are familiar, superficial, and not well grounded within the book. His insistence that everything has been changed by Freud’s discovery of the power of the unconscious—a judgment which this reviewer, among others, wishes to affirm—is not here well established or applied. Both here and in his other writings it is evident that Küng is not deeply involved with or seriously influenced by depth psychology, even in the Freudian form which this book affirms.

Freud and the Problem of God is both brief and readable. It may therefore serve to introduce some readers to Freud’s thought, if
they are led to further study. Certainly there are better studies of Freud and religion available.

The Jesus of Psychoanalysis by Françoise Dolto and Gérard Séverin argues neither for nor against Freudian understandings of persons, but uses them to interpret several passages from the four Gospels. (These are really Dolto’s interpretations, for Gérard Séverin’s role is to ask questions which “set up” those interpretations.) Dolto is both a practicing Catholic and a psychoanalyst, but apart from her distinctive affirmation of Christian belief, she is much more orthodox as a Freudian than as a Catholic. She acknowledges as much in the introduction, reporting that the way the Bible stories were presented to her when she was a child in church gave her no way of relating those writings to her life. Only after being psychoanalyzed and becoming a psychoanalyst did she learn to hear the Scriptures differently. “Nothing of what the Church of the twentieth century taught to those who were brought up in it seemed to me to be contained either in the Bible as a whole or in the Gospels and nothing in Christ’s message contradicted Freudian discoveries” (16). She believes that the Gospels illuminate Freud’s discoveries concerning the unconscious because the principal factors which produced the Gospels were the laws of the unconscious in Jesus, the evangelists, and the first hearers (18). Just what this means can best be seen by looking at examples of her interpretations.

By far the longest chapter of the book is the sixth, which examines “Resurrections from the Dead,” including interpretations of: (1) “The Raising of the Son of the Widow of Nain” (Lk. 7:11-16); (2) “The Healing of the Woman with a Hemorrhage and the Raising of the Daughter of Jairus” (Mark 5:21-43); and, (3) “The Raising of Lazarus” (John 11:1-44). It is here that some explanation is given of the method of interpretation, which builds on the judgment that the reader or hearer will only receive the symbolic message which the biblical texts contain by projecting his or her imagination into them and participating with one’s being, including one’s body. “The key to the reading of the Gospels is that it is necessary to project in order to receive” (81). One should add that these imaginative projections must be informed by a psychoanalytic understanding of human being. Séverin asks whether this is not seeking “evangelical hallucinations” (79). Dolto
insists that the answer is no. The imaginary constructs are confronted with “the sudden intrusion of reality” (80). Indeed it is Christ who confronts us with reality, intruding into our conventional worlds, so that the words of the texts are important, they are the touchstone (82).

The effect of the Freudian perspective is seen in the application. After the imaginative elaboration on the raising of the son of the widow of Nain we learn that what has happened to the widow's son is that by the call of Jesus' voice he is directed to “the adolescent metamorphosis in his larynx and testicles.” The boy was missing life, “dying,” because of the relationship to his mother who was widowed when the boy was a child. Jesus calls him to free himself from his mother and for his desire (86-87). In brief, the passage deals with the Oedipus complex (89). Because Jesus understood this, he was able to represent the symbolic husband for the mother and the symbolic father for the son and separate them from their destructive relationship, freeing both for life and desire (101).

After this interpretation one may not be surprised to learn that the problem with Jairus's daughter is the father's (apparent) unconscious incestuous fixation upon her (106). The father must gain faith in his own manhood in order to free his daughter for her femininity (114). In the case of Lazarus, the problem was that his love for Jesus was “one of carnal dependence.” It was “a passionate narcissistic friendship” (126). In his love for Lazarus Jesus had the temptation of a remaining trace of narcissism (126-28).

There is a Freudian christology/soteriology at work here. Jesus, Dolto tells us, evokes and redeems people's desires. By means of the dynamic of transference and countertransference, Jesus breaks the relationships in which those desires first arose. Jesus separates himself from his “remaining traces of carnality” in his love for Lazarus and Martha and Mary (131). Jesus is thus very human, but he is also different. He has “come from elsewhere” (68), he is “the source of a living power” (111), “we find in him the father, the paternal genius, the procreative essence” (102), and therefore he can evoke faith and free our desires.

This book is a splendid example of hearing in the texts the theories which one brings to them, of an external criticism. For those who share the more specifically Freudian understanding of persons, only interpretations of this sort could be regarded as
making sense of the texts. It is at least an illustration of what a psychoanalytical viewpoint can mean for biblical interpretation. Among those of us who do not share that perspective, some, including this reviewer, will want to affirm that imaginative participation is an important element in the hermeneutic process. Certainly this entails again the danger that we will find in the texts primarily what we bring to them. But every interpretive approach is entangled in this problem, and its danger is greatest among those interpreters who deny that they are so involved and are therefore unable to be self-critical about it. This little book is quite straightforward about the presuppositions of its discovery of "The Jesus of Psychoanalysis."

*The Birth of the Living God* by Ana-Maria Rizzuto is clearly the most substantial of these three books. It reports and interprets the results of clinical and theoretical study of the genesis and development of persons' representations of God. Dr. Rizzuto, who is clinical professor of psychiatry at Tufts Medical School and a faculty member at the Psychoanalytic Institute of New England, evidently writes this book first of all for Freudian analysts. In her judgment, there has been a general failure among her colleagues to see the importance of patients' God images as elaborations of their parental images. No psychoanalytic study of this subject has previously been available. Indeed, no systematic analytic clinical study of religion has been available. This is a strange deficiency in view of Freud's own great preoccupation with religion and particularly with the psychological origins of God representations. This book begins to fill that gap. It is about psychic experiences, and it specifically excludes consideration of the question of the reality of God for which its methods are not appropriate. That hardly means, however, that it has no relevance for theology and ministry, as the author is well aware.

The first part of the book lays a theoretical foundation for the clinical material (part 2) and the conclusions (part 3). It includes a careful summary of Freud's teachings on the origin and development of God representations (chap. 2) and an explanation of why there is a need to move beyond Freud (chap. 3). Rizzuto is a Freudian, but critically Freudian. She explains that though one may learn from Freud how persons develop God (and devil) representations, Freud has not explained how these representations become
sources of belief (36). Even in regard to the genesis of God representations, however, she believes Freud must be corrected. Specifically, she has found that the father image is not the only image used in that formation. Both of the real parents, and also the wished-for and the feared parents of imagination, contribute to this formation (44). Also, she has concluded that while the oedipal period is important, “formation of the image of God does not depend upon the oedipal conflict.” (44) Finding the process to be more complex and more varied than Freud judged, Rizzuto rejects his conclusion that all believers in God are still longing for a father (46). She argues that religion is an integral part of being truly human (47).

Part 2 presents four of the twenty clinical studies Rizzuto made in the final research for this project. These four clinical cases illustrate the findings and theses of the book. They have been chosen to show the variety, complexity, and psychic importance of God representations. The first case, for example, fits Freud’s emphasis on the oedipal conflict. The second, however, shows the characteristics of the God representation to be drawn primarily from the mother and is associated primarily with pre-oedipal developmental stages. The third takes those characteristics from the Father, but is associated developmentally with a post-oedipal stage. In the fourth case the paternal grandmother is found to be the primary source of characteristics for the God representation. This is to note but one (or two) of the many factors and facets illustrated by these case reports. Another which may be of particular interest is the finding that the importance of persons’ God representations is not dependent upon their believing in God.

The conclusions set forth in part 3 include summary statements regarding the many shapes of God representations together with general descriptions of their nature and role. Particular attention is given to the chronological process of the development of the representation throughout life. The complexity of this is but partly reflected in a two-page chart structured in Erikson’s terms. This may be especially helpful, because there has been considerable interest among Christian educators in Erikson’s Freudian developmentalism. Rizzuto is well aware that what she presents in this book should show teachers, parents, and pastors that they bear a heavier burden than they commonly suppose. She offers some
brief suggestions to those persons. She points out, for example, that attempts to “correct” a child’s view of God can be dangerously manipulative. If the “God” we seek to teach them is significantly out of harmony with what the child experiences in us, the effects may be very unfortunate (210-11).

Rizzuto acknowledges that this study “has the limitations of its method.” To this should be added that it also has the limitations of the author’s viewpoint. In addition to the Freudian convictions, one may note that she is not able to remain entirely free of questions relating to the reality of God, for she assumes that God is “a nonexperiential being” (44, 88). One result of this assumption—which fits nicely with her aim to avoid the question of God’s existence—is that her study of the genesis and development of representation of God excludes from consideration any possibility that God may in some way be a participant in that process. This approach may be necessary for her aims, but it is also prejudicial, and might be construed as casting doubt upon the adequacy of her results.

These observations should not be understood, however, as a denial of the value of this book. Many in our society and in our churches are in some degree working with Freudian understandings of human being. (Indeed, one may reasonably ask whether it is possible for any of us to remain uninfluenced by those teachings). All too often they are rejected or affirmed and used superficially. Rizzuto’s book should prove to be a help not only to analysts, but to all who wish seriously to grapple with the complexities of human growth, motivations, and convictions and who are interested in some of the possible implications of Freudian thought for ministry and theology. It is a difficult book for nonspecialists, but it is well worth careful study.
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Errata for Volume One

Lloyd R. Bailey should be listed as a member of the editorial board in number one.

John L. Topolewski, reviewer in number two, is a member of the Wyoming Conference, not the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference as stated in the writer's note on page 104.

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