



# Why the Old Testament Must Not Go Away

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**W**hat is it with the Old Testament? What is it that makes the Old Testament so problematic? Why such a torrent of books on “violence in the Old Testament”? What is it that makes the Old Testament the first place in the theological curriculum where faith meets criticism—to the consternation of many? What is it that makes the church always want to get rid of the Old Testament, by a general disregard, by willful misreading, or by carefully gerrymandered lectionary readings? Why is it that the Old Testament will not go away, even when we try so hard? Or why is it that the Old Testament must not go away, given what is at stake for us in the church?

## IT'S A GOD PROBLEM

In my view, it is the God who inhabits the text that generates all of these problems and possibilities. It is this inhabiting God who causes the Old Testament to be problematic. It is this inhabiting God who causes seminarians to vex over faith and criticism, because this God will accommodate none of our explanatory categories, even though we have done our JEDP best to dispel the vexation by explaining things away.

It is this inhabiting God who causes us embarrassment, who causes theologians to misread in order to make things come out right. This God creates such scandal that we cannot bear to read of such a God in church.

*The Old Testament is indispensable, will not go away, and must not go away, because it is a peculiar witness to the elusive, irascible, multilayered, multivoiced holiness that can affect agency in the world.*

It is this inhabiting God who does not go away, because it is this God who asserts many times and in many ways, to Pharaoh and to us: “I am the first and the last; before you were here and after you are gone, I am and I will be.”

It is this inhabiting God who must not go away, who is indispensable for the church and the life of the world, because this is the God who keeps the world—and our pretensions—open and penultimate, thus resisting lethal idolatries that come packaged as though they are precious.

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### IT'S A MATTER OF HOLINESS

The key term here is “holiness,” that irreducible otherness of God that lies beyond our explanatory categories, that defies our formulations, that refuses our domestication, that bespeaks a commanding morality but then rushes beyond morality in power or in pathos. It is remarkable that the biblical text dares to give name and character and history to this force of holiness, so that it is not an amorphous sacredness so popular now with the “spiritual but not religious” folk. We dare to name this holiness as the one who is creator of heaven and earth, deliverer of Israel, judge of the nations, redeemer of persons, and eventually, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The holiness of this God, “The Holy One of Israel,” is the complex subject of biblical discourse, maddeningly intransigent because it refuses to yield its otherness, which means that the name cannot be uttered and the glory cannot be seen. However, this text, God-given and Jewishly imagined, dares to sketch out this holiness in song, oracle, and narrative, knowing both that many different articulations are required and that no one articulation can be taken as flatly comprehensive and absolute.

Thus, holiness is *endlessly elusive*, never adequately articulated, never domesticated, never captured in our formulations, our doctrines, our liturgies, our pieties, or our moralities, but always concealed in the very moment of disclosure. We are, in our best efforts, very much like the Philistines who captured the ark and brought it with its putative God into the temple of Dagon. But when they went to the temple early on the third day, “Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off upon the threshold, only the trunk of Dagon was left to him” (1 Sam 5:5). This God dwells, variously, in a small voice, in a whirlwind, in a refused temple, in a pillar of cloud, in a disruptive poem, and we are left to wonder how to find God (Job 23:3) or how to escape the endless surveillance (Job 7:19–20).

Thus holiness is *inexplicably irascible*, arbitrary, and variously absent, neglectful, violent, disruptive, eruptive, and provocative. It is this trickster God who dispatched lying prophets and true prophets who sound like they are lying, who

makes nonnegotiable laws and who weeps in grief for love beyond law, who answers prophetic petitions and cancels fire and locust (Exod 9–10), but who, plumb line in hand (Amos 7:8), will not relent a third time. Now God rants against Israel, only then in aching soliloquy, coming to a new sensibility, because this one is God and not a mortal, “the Holy One in your midst” (Hos 11:9). Such irreducible freedom and inexplicable dominance is grossly beyond accountability. Out of it, you cannot build an empire or certify an orthodoxy. All you can do is wait for another word that will eventually come to contradict and perhaps correct the last disclosure.

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This holiness is *multilayered*, permitting no harmonization of these diffuse exhibits. Our various mantras of JEDP and our belated assemblage of four Gospel narratives constitute our acknowledgement that this testimony is beyond our harmonization, because the occupying character is too complex and too complicated. Indeed, the very documentary hypothesis is built from uncertainty about God’s name: What did Israel know and when did Israel know it? JEDP is, of course, a nineteenth-century understanding—still powerful among us—that takes these sources simply as human voices so that none of them needs to be taken with utmost seriousness. We hold on to our endless supersession until the testimony gets more and more “like us.” Early and late, the text defies our best categories and we are left with these multiple witnesses and pause in awe before the next wave of revelatory concealment.

This holiness is *multivoiced*. We are addressed,

- in the songs of women who sing of victory and deliverance and new births and sad defeats
- in the utterances of wild urgency by poets who dare to say, “Thus says the Lord,” leaving us no sure way to parse their claim
- in the punctilious design of priests who know how to host holiness, who know, down to the last mini-cubit, about beauty and symmetry
- in the reverberations of the psalms that name God both in the extremity of doxology and in the depths of abandonment and neglect and betrayal
- in the one-off narratives where anything can happen one time, whether a held-back sun, bread from above, old bones breathed to new life, or a scroll shredded and rewritten in expanded form.

This polyphony of voices somehow arises from and speaks back to holiness. We catch on to some of it as we are able, and we miss so much that eludes us. But all of it refuses closure or coherence, offering a kind of disjunction to our ordinary life that we cannot master but which we must engage.

That named, characterized holiness—elusive, irascible, multilayered, and multivoiced—is given as *witness*. The witnesses, because they cannot do otherwise, are compelled beyond themselves to some hint of truth that they cannot withstand. What they give us is not certitude, not argument, not proposition, not even itself the “gospel,” but only testimony that jolts or soothes.

This witness is *peculiar*. It is peculiar even in translation, let alone in Hebrew. It is singular in its vivid, palpable detail, entertaining the imagery that God is like wind, like fire, and like bread; one whose arm is not short, whose face is hidden, and whose rear end we may be permitted to see. Something bodily, something defiant, something emancipatory, something threatening, something anxiety-producing; sometimes planting and building, sometimes weeping, sometimes gentle, sometimes plucking up and tearing down. This peculiarity continues to haunt us and compel us.

#### IT'S A QUESTION OF AGENCY

This witness eventually comes to attest that this named, characterized holiness can affect *agency in the world*. This God is the subject of active verbs. That agency sometimes is given in narrative specificity, but more often in lyrical utterance. That agency, more often descriptive than declarative, is life-giving:<sup>1</sup>

The LORD sets the prisoners free;  
the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.  
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;  
the LORD loves the righteous.  
The LORD watches over the strangers;  
he upholds the orphan and the widow,  
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. (Ps 146:7–9)

But Israel can also attest negative agency on the part of YHWH:

Yet you have rejected us and abased us,  
and have not gone out with our armies.  
You made us turn back from the foe,  
and our enemies have gotten spoil.  
You have made us like sheep for the slaughter,  
and have scattered us among the nations.  
You have sold your people for a trifle,  
demanding no high price for them. (Ps 44:9–12)

The claim of divine agency is exceedingly difficult; it is the place where Professor Fretheim and I have had the most sustained engagement. In Fretheim's hermeneutic, things can work without direct divine agency. My sense is that Fretheim will not and does not want to exclude divine agency, but he wants it not to be overstated in casual ways when the text is often, as he has shown, more subtle in its

<sup>1</sup>The distinction between “descriptive” and “declarative” psalms is from Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta; John Knox, 1981)116–151.

claim. What is at stake in such agency is the insistence that the world is not a closed or autonomous enterprise, but is subject to an active holiness. And indeed even the most gentle of religious claims—that “God loves” and that “God forgives” and that “God is faithful”—all attest to divine agency, even if of a soft variety with more offensive claims avoided. Religious progressives, among whom I tend to live, are vigilant that there be no talk of an “interventionist God.” But of course such a notion of agency begins with the wrong assumption that an intrusion amounts to an interruption of a self-sustained system. The very claim of God’s inordinate holiness avers from the outset that God does not intrude, but treats the world, soon and late, as God’s creature, yielding what Fretheim rightly calls a “partnership.” In any case, however, we face in our culture the epistemological embarrassment that this peculiar witness will not let us imagine that our world is immune from the active force of holiness whose name we know. In this testimony, that active force of holiness requires no special warrant for engagement, because the shoe is on the other foot. Professor Fretheim’s defining book is entitled *God and World*, not *World and Perhaps God*.<sup>2</sup>

One can see the trickiness of divine agency in the biblical text. At the outset of the Exodus narrative, YHWH boldly announces agency: “I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey. . . . The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them” (Exod 3:8–9). But the next verse addresses Moses: “Come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt” (3:10). The rhetoric moves easily from one agent to the other, the two being in collusion.

Or again, in the Song of Deborah:

To the sound of musicians at the watering places,  
there they repeat the triumphs of the LORD,  
the triumphs of his peasantry in Israel. (Judg 5:11)

The double agency (peasantry and LORD) lets YHWH off the hook as sole agent—except of course the peasants stood no chance by themselves.

## IT’S ABOUT PASSION

This holy character capable of agency is committed to dialogic existence that takes YHWH’s partner with defining seriousness. The recurring term for that dialogic passion is “covenant.” YHWH enters into covenant variously and participates in the ongoing processes of covenant violation and covenant renewal. The result of this divine propensity is a dynamism that creates freedom, generates dispute, and keeps both parties to covenant at the edge of risk. It follows that the issues of “common theology”—power and knowledge—are of only marginal inter-

<sup>2</sup>Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005).

est in the horizon of Israel, though Israel does sometimes reflect on whether YHWH's arm is too short to save.<sup>3</sup> Much more central are issues of fidelity, a relational practice that does not admit of settlement, but that requires durable attentiveness to the relationship by both parties. It is for that reason that the defining marks of YHWH and YHWH's engagement in covenant are relational terms: steadfast love, faithfulness, justice, righteousness, compassion (*hesed, amunah, mishpat, tsedaqah, raham*—see Hos 2:19–20; Lam 3:22–23). All of these terms bespeak YHWH's persistent commitment. But they also become the ground for quarrelsome disputes about reliable relatedness. Thus the textual interactions of covenant regularly concern commandments and whether they have been obeyed and promises and whether they have been honored. Such a mapping of God and God's way in the world goes profoundly in the face of common and recurring assumptions about God in ancient culture (common theology) and in our modern culture.

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We may see the depth of such dialogic passion when we consider the founding narratives of Abraham and Moses. God's commitment to Abraham would seem to be unilateral, and Abraham is the great "knight of faith." Except that in Gen 18:22–33 Abraham engages in determined bargaining with YHWH concerning the rescue of Sodom. And YHWH, for a time, agrees to bargain. The interaction exhibits much more than a unilateral promise and a responding singularity of faith. Concerning Moses, the agreements at Sinai strike one as complete and settled. YHWH commands; Israel pledges obedience. Except that the dramatic interaction of Exod 32–34 and the golden calf, a model of covenantal crisis, entails hard bargaining and bold intervention on the part of Moses (Exod 32:11–14). Thus the petition of Moses, as Fretheim saw in his early book,<sup>4</sup> evokes a change of mind on YHWH's part. YHWH is impinged upon by Moses.

It is credible to think that these narrative accounts concerning Abraham and Moses (which arise from Israel's defining sense of itself as YHWH's people) become a model for what follows in the dialogic tradition of Israel in both prophets and psalms.<sup>5</sup> Both prophets and psalms constitute practices of dialogue and are surely to be understood as complementary practices of dialogic faith.

On the one hand, the prophetic utterances of the eighth and seventh centuries that anticipate the failure of Jerusalem are characteristically "speeches of judg-

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<sup>3</sup>See Isaiah 50:2; 59:1. On "common theology," see Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 B.C.* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979) 670–691.

<sup>4</sup>Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 50.

<sup>5</sup>On the Exodus narrative as a move from lament to praise, see James Plastaras, *The God of the Exodus* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1966).

ment” wherein YHWH establishes, via poetic imagination, that the covenant has been violated and that Israel will receive due judgment. That is, Israel’s infidelity evokes alienation. Even in this relentless stream of judgment, however, there are footnotes of dissent. Thus the petitions of Amos and the protests of Jeremiah and the exhibits of divine pathos in Hosea and Jeremiah attest to a hidden-until-brought-to-speech turmoil in God’s inclination.

The matter is not different in the sixth century, amid the exile, when Israel complains and lives close to despair. The subtext, even of Second Isaiah, is engagement with the tradition of complaint in the wake of what was taken to be divine judgment. So Israel can complain of divine infidelity: “But Zion said, The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me” (Isa 49:14). Then, God’s response, reflecting another complaint from Israel: “Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem? Or have I no power to deliver?” (50:2). We even hear this divine admission: “For a brief moment I abandoned you. . . . In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you” (54:7–8).

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In each case the complaint evokes a divine response from this God who is willing to be impacted by and takes seriously the restless insistence of the dialogic partner. The God who speaks by way of prophetic imagination is not one who issues unilateral oracles, but is one who struggles with the residue of a covenantal arrangement that has not worked well.

On the other hand, the psalms with their disjunctive rhythm of lament and hymn exhibit from Israel’s side the same restless engagement with YHWH. The emotional extremity of laments has been almost too much for us to voice; but clearly the God who commits to covenant is not immune to the disputatiousness that is grounded in lived experience. What emerges in the psalms that characteristically (but not uniformly) move to praise, trust, and thanks is that no durable settlement can be reached. There can be only momentary equilibrium and well-being along the way of enduring contestation.

It is likely that we need to learn to read prophets and psalms more closely together. These literatures attend to the two sides of dialogic engagement. The prophets, before the exile, state the case against Israel; the lament psalms state the case against YHWH. And as in any troubled relationship, both parties most often assume they are in the right. Of course it turns out here, as in any troubled relationship, that the assignment of fault is unhelpful. What matters and what prevails is the will to move past what has failed in order to sustain what is treasured. In the wake of such disputatious oracles and poems, there is a defining uneasiness about the relationship that is of course interrupted by occasions of beginning again in

hope. At the edge of such an endless, painful negotiation, the book of Job, with its refusal to settle, offers a collage of human protest and divine repudiation of that protest.<sup>6</sup> The entire tradition refuses theodicy, because relationships that are open-ended are never resolved by the logic of explanation.

According to current critical judgment, much of the Old Testament is a product of the exile, when a displaced people struggled to maintain a distinctive identity in the midst of imperial domination. There was of course the yearning for Jewishness amid the power of Babylon. There was a yearning to return to the land. There was a passion for YHWH amid the force of the Babylonian gods. The tradition also suggests that it was an insistence upon a life of dialogic engagement in the midst of imperial monologue—and thus a refusal of totalism—that energized the textual tradition. The relentless dialogic passion of the tradition was perhaps not so needed or so urgent in an earlier safe and stable Jerusalem with king and temple. When such institutions are gone and identity is in jeopardy, however, a strategy of cagey, ironic playfulness is required in order to defy and outflank the dominant powers who seem to have no sense of humor and no capacity for the dialogue that is essential for a sustainable humanness. It is not surprising that the Jewish capacity for dialogue, evoked in exilic circumstance, is generative of this textual tradition.

But after we have said as much as we can about evocative context and strategic practices, we may judge that the deep basis for dialogue is rooted not in context or in strategy but in the character of YHWH. There is enough to suggest that YHWH's own sense of self and engagement with Israel evokes an internal dialogic life in YHWH whose self-interest in glory and whose commitment to Israel variously intersect but do not always cohere. The tradition does not cringe from the notion that YHWH is indeed multilayered and multivoiced. Thus, the soliloquy of Hos 11:1–9 has YHWH reverse YHWH's righteous indignation. Similarly, the pathos of Jer 3 can have YHWH adhere to the Torah about a first and a second husband, but then we hear YHWH reach beyond Torah prohibition in a yearning that risks humiliation (3:11). Again, YHWH can bluster about the coming end (4:23–26), but in the next verse (surely an editorial addition, if you take it that way), we are given a divine afterthought that qualifies everything: "Yet, I will not make a full end" (Jer 4:27).

What we have explained away critically as late editing may better be the throwaway line of divine candor in a therapeutic conversation in which the speaker tries to find a point of equilibrium in a relationship and in a context that admits of no such equilibrium. The internal life of YHWH, exhibited through the imagination of Israel, offers a thick, engaged life of risk and challenge and perplexity and passion...and then resolve. At bottom, I propose, what we have understood critically, contextually, and strategically is grounded in God's own life. And if we are to attend well to this witness, we may reverse our critical processes to start theo-

<sup>6</sup>On the tension of genres in Job, see Claus Westermann, *The Structure of the Book of Job: A Form-Critical Analysis* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

logically with the God who cannot resist the risks that accompany dialogic passion. YHWH remains, no doubt, the senior and presiding member of that dialogue; but even that is sometimes placed in question with provisional role reversal in which the other voices of the dialogue assume authority and make insistences to which YHWH must respond.

#### IT'S ABOUT LIFE

All of these markings of *dialogic holiness*—elusive, irascible, multilayered, multivoiced, capable of agency—are crucial for distinguishing YHWH from the idols. This God, unlike the idols, is “pro-life” in the most profound ways, intent upon sustaining the structures and juices of life, capable of intervening on behalf of life in zones of recalcitrant death. Professor Fretheim, more than anyone in our generation of Old Testament teachers, has shown how YHWH is the creator who sustains the life-giving processes and orders of creation. In his signature article on the exodus and ecological disaster, he has shown the way in which YHWH resists the power of death and generates new life possibilities.<sup>7</sup> That push to new life is everywhere evident in the text: In the ancestral narratives, we are told of many new births of new heirs to durable promises that are given amid barren women; in the Exodus narrative, the life giver makes a way out of no way, a way through the chaotic waters, to new life. And as Gerhard von Rad has shown so compellingly, the exile, when all had failed, became the venue for deep newness, a new thing in Isaiah, a new covenant in Jeremiah, a new temple in Ezekiel, in truth “all things new” when there was no ground for newness in circumstance.

This God does indeed pluck up and tear down, does destroy and overthrow; but the text shows that this is never the final word, because this is a God of life. For good reason, Hans Heinrich Schmid, in his study of Rom 4:17, has judged the equivalence of three claims for the God of life: *creatio ex nihilo*, resurrection of the dead, and justification by grace through faith.<sup>8</sup>

Because the newness wrought by the resolve, purpose, and agency of God is not mere extrapolation or derivation, the textual tradition strains to find language adequate to the reality. Bernd Janowski notes how the entire Psalter attests to restoration of a life of joy and strength and glad obedience, for “joy comes in the morning” (Ps 30:5).<sup>9</sup> God’s holiness moves us characteristically from death to life.

It is impossible to overstate the importance for the life of the world of this agent for life who opposes the power of death. Thus in the two political pivot points of the Old Testament, this God of life subverts the force of death that is embodied in the Egypt of Pharaoh and in the Babylon of Nebuchadnezzar, rulers who

<sup>7</sup>Terence E. Fretheim, “The Plagues as Ecological Signs of Historical Disaster,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120/3 (Autumn 1991) 385–396.

<sup>8</sup>Hans Heinrich Schmid, “Rechtfertigung als Schöpfungsgeschehen,” *Rechtfertigung: Festschrift für Ernst Käsemann*, ed. Johannes Friedrich et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976) 403–414.

<sup>9</sup>Bernd Janowski, *Arguing with God: A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013) esp. 248–284.

depend upon the legitimating power of the idols. In the Exodus narrative not much is made of divine legitimation of Pharaoh. The Egyptian gods are mentioned only in passing (Exod 12:12); but clearly the political dispute is a theological confrontation. The theological dimension of the dispute is more frontal in the Babylonian crisis, as Isaiah can mock the Babylonian gods in 46:1–2 and then link those would-be gods to the claim of imperial autonomy in 47:8 where Babylon claims, “I am, and there is no one besides me; I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children.”

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The God of life, committed to dialogic transactions that make life possible, is contrasted to the idols who have no power to act, no capacity for newness. In the most complete characterization of the idols, the psalmist asserts:

Their idols are silver and gold,  
the work of human hands.  
They have mouths, but do not speak;  
eyes, but do not see.  
They have ears, but do not hear;  
noses, but do not smell.  
They have hands, but do not feel;  
feet, but do not walk;  
they make no sound in their throats. (Ps 115:4–7)

And verse eight declares that those who trust in the idols of numbness and passivity become them: couch potatoes, numb and passive, lifeless and without possibility. “Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them.” That exposé of the idols in verses 4–7 is sandwiched within a statement about YHWH:

God does as God pleases (v. 3)  
Idols do nothing (vv. 4–7)  
God provides a fivefold blessing (vv. 12–15)

The term “bless” means, in the orbit of creation, to infuse the power for life into these several carriers of life: “us, the house of Israel, the house of Aaron, those who fear the Lord, you.” The fivefold “bless” is reinforced by “increase,” an echo of “be fruitful.” The capacity of YHWH is contrasted with the powers of death that are committed to the failed status quo while the God of life opens the way for new possibility.

The same contrast is dramatically lined out in the polemic of Jer 10:1–16. The idols have no power for the future and merit mocking: “They are worthless, a work

of delusion” (v. 15). But the antiphon of YHWH stands in sharp contrast, since “The LORD is the true God....He is the one who formed all things” (vv. 10, 16).

The idols, packaged in ideologies, become icons and legitimators of status quo systems of death. This God of dialogic holiness refuses such despairing closure. The Old Testament will not, cannot, and must not go away, because it names this God who sustains and opens ways of life. This testimony will keep exposing the idols and keep witnessing to the alternative. This testimony will not let us give in, with a clear conscience, to our ideologies of certitude or our totalisms or our predatory autonomy.

The issue is joined theologically:

- this peculiar testimony refuses the dissolution of the character of God in progressive liberalism;
- this peculiar testimony refuses vacuous spirituality that eschews tradition and community;
- this peculiar testimony refuses the mantras of orthodox certitude;
- this peculiar testimony refuses self-congratulatory scientism that imagines that knowledge itself can give life.

This peculiar testimony refuses the collusion of rigid conservatism, spacey progressivism, and knowing atheism, all of which together imagine that this agency for life can be contained in our preferred packages. The delicate collusion of this God of life with radishes and kangaroos who sing praises, as well as the alliance of this God of life who blesses with the cries of the oppressed, offers a way beyond the credo of the idols: “My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth” (Deut 8:17).

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## GOD AS NEIGHBOR

As this agent of dialogic holiness refuses the idols, so this same agent notices, sustains, and summons neighbors. It is not good for this dialogic God to be alone. Likely that is how the Creator knew that it was “not good that the man should be alone” (Gen 2:18). God is endlessly seeking companions who will live in fidelity, and so is endlessly transposing *creatures* into *neighbors*. That formulation may be a bit beyond Fretheim’s way of speaking, but he has gone a far way to show that God treats creatures as partners, co-creators, and co-conspirators in letting the earth function fruitfully. It occurred to me in tracing out the life and propensity of this elusive, irascible agent of dialogic holiness that “neighbor” might be an appropriate antithesis to “idol.” Idols are those who cannot and will not participate in the dialogic transactions that make life possible. By contrast, neighbors are those who

share in the tasks, burdens, worries, and wonders of a common enterprise. It strikes me that the inclination of YHWH toward neighborliness is highly contested through the Old Testament, an itch that flies in the face of cleanness and purity. As a result the move from purity toward welcoming hospitality requires a redefinition of holiness and a recharacterization of God's own self.<sup>10</sup>

The creatures are invited into companionship with the creator early on. It is, as Israel bears witness, the move toward Israel that begins an active neighborliness. That move was itself toward a neighbor in need, whereby the cry of the slaves was heard and honored in Egypt. The mapping of YHWH's dialogic life in the tradition of Deuteronomy exhibits the hard battle for neighborliness both in Israel and, I imagine, in the life of YHWH. On the one hand, there is an insistent notice of widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor, the ones who are unproductive "takers" in the agrarian economy (Deut 24:19–22). That is a big push of social responsibility toward the unproductive. But of course this is offset and more than offset by the mantra in the book Deuteronomy to "purge the evil" that is connected with the Canaanites (17:2; 19:13, 19; 21:21). Deuteronomy is perhaps the baseline for the struggle for neighborliness, but also for the urge toward purity. There is, I have no doubt, a line of continuity from Deuteronomy with its intense covenantalism to the words of Third Isaiah. Fred Gaiser has seen that in Isa 56 the welcoming of eunuchs and foreigners into the community of Israel is a decisive and defining move away from the exclusionary mantras of older Torah traditions.<sup>11</sup> The capstone of that move toward neighborliness is the opening of the doors of the temple to all: "For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (56:7). That welcome is a dramatic counter to all of the old rules of purity that have governed so much of our worship tradition.

But of course the old versions of holiness keep reappearing, perhaps tempting YHWH to a lesser passion for the neighborhood. But that divine urge toward neighborliness finally will not be resisted. Jesus and his companions ponder the hard question of neighborliness. As Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza has seen, even Jesus has to be instructed by the outsider woman with her abrupt: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mark 7:27).<sup>12</sup>

The big move toward neighborliness is of course the struggle in the church to admit Gentiles, the unclean ones whom God has declared to be clean. I have no doubt that that decision is rooted eventually in the dialogic character of God who could not be alone, could not be apart from the radically other, and who fought a battle of self-identity against great cultural odds in order to make friends of those who seem to threaten. That decision for the others eventuated in the verdict:

<sup>10</sup>On the interface of "cleanness" and hospitality, see Richard Beck, *Unclean: Meditation on Purity, Hospitality, and Mortality* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2011).

<sup>11</sup>Frederick J. Gaiser, "A New Word on Homosexuality? Isaiah 56:1–8 as Case Study," *Word & World* 14/3 (1994) 280–293 (cf. Lev 21:16–23).

<sup>12</sup>Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) 15.

“There is no longer Jew or Gentile, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28; see Col 3:11).

And we are not yet finished! New waves of Gentiles who offend keep surfacing, and the same arguments have to be made again and again. The idols are immune from this, I think, never having to struggle with the question, never to welcome others, never to move to a new place. It is only this God who, in the midst of acute self-regard, turns away from self toward the other. Emmanuel Levinas has taught us that it is in seeing the face of *the other* that we become ethically engaged.<sup>13</sup> So I imagine that this God looked into the face of the other, whether Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free, gay or straight, and summoned to a new neighborliness so that each may be “the apple of the eye” (see Deut 32:10; Ps 27:8).

God is not finished yet with all the forgotten dialogue, nor are we. It is only the idols who grant permanent settled lives. This God, by contrast, keeps transgressing the old boundaries for the sake of new neighborly possibility. God calls out our name, giving new identity. God makes all things new in the neighborhood.

#### A GOD (AND TEXT) THAT KEEP US HUMAN

Eventually the durability of the biblical text is tested by practice. The Old Testament cannot, will not, and must not go away because it is the singular script through which to perform the most intense and compelling dimension of our lives in a way that keeps us human. It is a travesty that in much of the church the inscrutable depth of the text and its testimony has been withheld from the faithful. The result of such withholding is that many have been required, perforce, to perform their lives through less adequate texts, whether the text of Freud or Darwin or Marx or Adam Smith or a dozen other candidates. That withholding of the text has been in collusion with the force of technological positivism in a way that stages life at the surface without the wonder and ballast of depth. The outcome of that collusion is variously unbearable fatigue, anxiety, denial, despair, or eventually violence. Thus, I propose that attentiveness to this character of dialogical holiness is a quite practical matter, even if our articulation of it leaves the hard pastoral work still to be done.

There is no doubt that the Old Testament, whatever its “historical” rootage, is an act of consummate artistic imagination. This dialogic agent of holiness is given us through an originary imagination. And the wonder of pastoral interpretation is that such artistic imagination is mobile; it can be transferred to new venues of faith and life.

In pastoral context this script of dialogic holiness permits us to stand in grateful awe and thanks and praise as we ponder the creator who continues to give good gifts beyond all that we can ask or imagine. Wonderful things happen in our congregations.

<sup>13</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

There is nothing remarkable about this, simply another day in the life of the church, the life of the pastor, and the life of the world.

The community gathered around this text voices and knows and trusts something beyond anything our society can offer. Without this script we may settle for a safe self-perception or for a rigidity that knows too much and so judges us all. This script gives us something compelling to talk about after we have exhausted the easier data of ourselves.<sup>14</sup>

As with intimate pastoral practice, so it with great public issues; this agent of dialogic holiness is an endlessly tenacious advocate for a just, compassionate body politic. It is this God who continues to whisper *mishpat* (justice) in the ears of kings and brokers and bishops and deans, who will not let us settle for our pyramids of power and money. This script, like no other, knows about the force of cries for mercy and the enigmatic ways in which holiness hears such cries and rallies to transform. Resistance to such a force is of course immense and durable, but this elemental resolve for justice will have its say.

This text, in zones of pastoral intimacy, may leave us in grateful awe or in anguished dismay. The text, in zones of public power, may leave us enlivened for neighborliness or driven to active protest against systems of bodily damage. In both pastoral and public zones, the realities of living and dying, of gratitude and abandonment, of possibility and oppression, are given voice. They are given voice by the primal speaker of life who then listens for responses that voice the range of lived experience.

The text must not be lost because it sponsors and models and legitimates the connection between heaven and earth that keeps life bearable and viable, honest and open to newness.

Where this text is lost—whether in secular buoyancy or cynicism, in frozen orthodoxy or pious innocence—we are left with the scripts that feature the idols who do not speak, see, hear, smell, feel, walk, notice, care, or act. It is no wonder that when we listen again to this text in our liturgy, we respond by rote, “Thanks be to God.” With that phrase we slide over a hundred hermeneutical quandaries. We do so in confidence that whatever critical judgments we make, this odd script is a truth-carrier beyond our critical capacity. It places us at risk with a need to be in dialogue—in dialogue with nothing short of holiness. ⊕

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<sup>14</sup>Isak Dinesen, *Out of Africa and Shadows on the Grass* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985) 126.