



Ecumenism as the Shared Practice of a Peculiar Identity

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CLASSIC ECUMENISM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY HAS HAD TO DO WITH PARTNERSHIP and cooperation among established denominational traditions. These denominational groupings have tended to reflect centrist, mainline churches that, in their own particular spheres, exercised some theological hegemony. Thus, ecumenism tended to focus upon churches finding each other in the midst of their pronounced socio-politico-economic accommodation to context. Important questions about the locus of such churches in their more-or-less compromised social contexts were not raised. One of the practical effects of such quests for unity and cooperation—without serious self-criticism—was the exclusion from the horizon of churches that did not participate in such centrist hegemony, for example, churches in the left-wing reformation and pentecostal traditions.

The ecumenical work that is now to be done is no longer among hegemonic denominations and church traditions, as though the largest animals were posturing in front of each other in the forest. Our current context requires that we

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An examination of ancient Israel's response to imperial domination suggests ways in which the church might assert its odd identity in a culture in which it is no longer dominant. The present ecumenical task of the churches is to recognize a unity found in an odd identity for an odd vocation in a world deeply organized against gospel oddity.

recognize that unity among Christian churches is not very urgent or important unless it is unity found in an *odd identity* for an *odd vocation* in a world deeply organized against *gospel oddity*. The Lima document prepared the way for this embrace of common oddness, taking baptismal identity and vocation as the starting point for common life. But now, given where the churches find themselves, a common life in baptism is not a matter of agreeing on formulae, classical or otherwise, but on *common praxis* deriving from a shared odd identity.

It is not clear in what way an Old Testament teacher can contribute to these conversations, given our propensity to traffic in old church formulae. The present essay seeks to think through Israel's odd identity in the Old Testament, an identity of course adjusted to different circumstances, but always in deep tension with hegemonic power all around. Increasingly the church in the west is in an analogous situation to that of ancient Israel, no longer hegemonic itself but pressed by powers that are indeed hegemonic.¹ The characteristic locus of ancient Israel as a margined community in the midst of hegemonic power (either indifferent or hostile to that odd identity) may be a useful place from which to re-read the text and re-think a shared identity in the church.

I.

In the world of ancient Israel in the period of the Old Testament, it is not difficult to identify the ruling groups who we may suppose constructed and maintained dominant values. The list of superpowers that dominated the landscape of that ancient world includes, in sequence, Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia.² From an Israelite perspective one can make some differentiations in their several modes of hegemony, so that it appears that Assyria was the most consistently brutal, and Persia appears to have operated in a more benign or enlightened way; but those differences likely were strategic, or at least the Israelite perception and presentation of them are likely strategic. Without fail, the impinging superpower intended to dominate the political landscape, to control military power, and to preempt the authority to tax. The control of military power, moreover, included the right to draft manpower, which issued in forced labor for state projects.

On the whole these concentrations of power tolerated little deviation in matters of importance to them. To ensure compliance, moreover, the political-economic-military power of hegemony is paired, characteristically, with imperial myths and rituals, liturgical activities which legitimated power realities. It is not too much to conclude that the interface of political and liturgical efforts intended to generate a totalizing environment outside of which were permitted no political forays and, where effective, no deviant imagination. Such hegemony maintained

¹It is this awareness that has produced thinking, especially evoked by Lesslie Newbigin, that "the west" is a mission field for the church. See *Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*, ed. George R. Hunsberger and Craig van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

²I am of course aware that internally there were certainly hegemonic groups that prevailed. By focusing on the impact of the international empires, I do not overlook internal domination. I assume that patterns of domination are roughly the same, whether by external or internal agents.

both a monopoly of violence and a monopoly of imagination that assured for its own young privilege, certitude, and domination; it invited into its universal horizon those who stood outside the primary benefits of that monopoly, but who had come to terms with its visible and unquestioned privilege, certitude, and domination.

From an Israelite perspective, the totalizing capacity of hegemony is perceived, characteristically, as arrogant and threatening.³ Thus, with ancient memories of oppression still palpable, Ezekiel can have pharaoh assert: "My Nile is my own, I made it for myself" (Ezek 29:3). And in the Isaiah tradition, Assyria gloats:

Has any of the gods of the nations saved their land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of these countries have saved their countries out of my hand, that the Lord should save Jerusalem out of my hand? (Isa 36:18-20)

Babylon is not different: "I shall be mistress forever....I am, and there is no one beside me....No one sees me" (Isa 47:7-10).

We may register only two footnotes to this parade of totalizing superpowers. First, in the early part of the monarchic period in Jerusalem, emerging in a brief pause from imperial interference, the Davidic-Solomonic regime was not beholden to any external power. And yet the evidence we have, admittedly from a certain (Deuteronomic-prophetic) perspective, is that the Jerusalem regime practiced the same totalizing efforts, surely to be "like all the other nations."⁴ Both the relentless prophetic critiques and perhaps especially the Rechabite alternative of Jeremiah 35 indicate that even this regime is no exception to the pattern of hegemonic rule.

Second, in addition to the standard line-up of imperial powers, we may mention a prophetic concern about Tyre, especially in Isa 23:1-18 and Ezekiel 26-28. What interests us is that Tyre's significance is not military and political, but economic. Indeed, Isaiah suggests that Tyre is the epicenter of a world economy that features opulence, self-indulgence, and general social disregard, so that Tyre can be imagined as saying: "I am a god; I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas" (Ezek 28:2).

This recital of hegemony, focusing on political power but ending with a recognition of commercialism, provides a window on our own current consideration of character ethics. I submit that in our time and place the hegemonic power of international corporate capitalism, driven of course by United States technological power, creates a totalizing environment that imposes its values, its field of images, and its limits of vision upon all comers. Theodore von Laue speaks of *The World Revolution of Westernization*, and more recently Charles Reich terms this phenome-

³On this motif in Israelite perspective, see Donald E. Gowan, *When Man Becomes God: Humanism and Hybris in the Old Testament*, Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series 6 (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1975).

⁴Norman K. Gottwald, "A Hypothesis about Social Class in Monarchic Israel in the Light of Contemporary Studies of Social Class and Social Stratification," *The Hebrew Bible in Its Social World and in Ours* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1993) 139-64, has offered an analysis of the realities of class in the formation of the monarchy.

non “the money government.”⁵ It is self-evident that this community of ruthless expansionism and those allied with it do not need to expend any energy in inculcating their own young into practices of privilege, certitude, and domination. I imagine, moreover, that our modest reflection upon character ethics in such a totalizing environment is not unlike that of Israel in the ancient world, deeply perplexed about how to sustain any vision or practice of life that is not swept away by the force of hegemony. This deep vexation concerns those of us who live at the center of the hegemony, who are implicated in it and benefit from it. But there is also deep vexation among those in the less privileged places that we are pleased to term “under-developed,” as they wonder how to maintain any local, rooted identity in the face of invasive, seemingly irresistible Coca Cola.

II.

In its relentless imperial matrix, ancient Israel had only a slight chance and thin resources. It is clear, nonetheless, that a central preoccupation of the Old Testament, surely a discernment assembled and transmitted out of a passionate ideological perspective, is to maintain the scandal and liberty of particularity in the face of totalizing threat. I shall suggest that the maintenance of a self-aware, self-conscious alternative identity in the face of totalism is precisely the practice of character ethics that aims to generate and authorize liberated “agents of their own history”; such practice depends upon the great “thickness” of the community that makes possible such liberated agents on a day-to-day basis.

I will organize my efforts around an easy scheme of superpowers: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. (I am of course aware of the historical-critical qualifications concerning the literature, but I will deal with the literature in terms of its presentation. Texts, for example, that deal with the ancient pharaoh of the exodus period will be read without the critical qualification of later dating.)

Israel as an intentional counter-community practiced relentless, dense memory as an alternative to the coopting amnesia of the empire.

1. *Concerning Egypt.* The Exodus liturgy (Exodus 1-15) dominates the imagination of Israel and continues to be decisive for Israel’s identity. Three aspects of the narrative pertain to what we may roughly regard as character formation. First, three times, the passover provisions pay attention to intentional instructing: “When your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this observance?’” (Exod 12:26; cf. 18:8, 14). The liturgy is a launching pad for conversation. The prescribed response to the child’s question is a narrative reiteration of a peculiar world with Yahweh at its center.

Second, the entire passover provision of Exodus 12-13 is quite specific and self-conscious about liturgical detail. It is clear, nonetheless, that the primary intention of the narrative and the liturgy is to construct a counter-world whereby

⁵Theodore H. von Laue, *The World Revolution of Westernization: The Twentieth Century in Global Perspective* (New York: Oxford University, 1987); Charles Reich, *Opposing the System* (New York: Random House, 1995).

pharaoh's totalizing power and totalizing explanation of reality are regularly defeated. The Israelite boy or girl is invited to live in a social reality where pharaoh's abusive power does not prevail.

Third, the narrative makes clear that the recital offers a curriculum for the young:

Go to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his officials, in order that I may show these signs [plagues] of mine among them, and that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I made fools of the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them — so that you may know that I am the Lord. (Exod 10:1-2)

The concern—to make this defining memory operative to the third and fourth generations—is crucial for our subject.

2. *Concerning Assyria.* Critical judgment suggests that the book of Deuteronomy is to be understood as an instrument of resistance against Assyrian totalism, perhaps influenced by Assyrian forms of treaty documents.⁶ Pivotal to Josiah's reform is the celebration of the passover (2 Kings 23:21-23). The focus on passover, of course, draws resistance to Assyria into the world of passover resistance to Egypt found in Exodus 12-13. It is the disciplined, intentional retelling of the exodus-seder narrative that provides ground for alternative existence outside Assyrian hegemony. The passover festival recalls Israel's root identity of emancipation and covenant; but it also brings that counter-identity, always contemporary, into the Assyrian crisis.

Passover is one of three defining festivals that will give liturgical, dramatic, and narrative articulation to Israel's distinctiveness, the other two festivals being weeks and booths (Deut 16:1-8, 9-17). Thus the danger and the rescue from Egypt are transposed into an Assyrian world. The provision of 16:1-8 mentions Egypt three times; the following provision for the festival of weeks moves more directly to an ethical derivation: "Rejoice before the Lord your God—you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levites resident in your towns, as well as the strangers, the orphans, and the widows who are among you" (16:11). And then the imperative: "Remember that you were a slave in Egypt" (16:12).

3. *Concerning Babylon.* The great danger for Jewish exiles in Babylon was assimilation into the totalizing world of Nebuchadnezzar, with the commensurate abandonment of the particular identity of Judaism. It is common to recognize that Second Isaiah is a message to Jews that they will be liberated to go home to Jerusalem. In my view, however, prior to going home geographically, Israel must go home to Jewishness, emotionally, liturgically, imaginatively. Consider this counsel: "Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from

⁶See R. Frankena, "The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon and the Dating of Dt," *Oud-Testamentische Studien* 14 (1965) 122-54; Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament*, *Analecta Biblica* 21A (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1978); and Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972).

which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you” (Isa 51:1-2).

I do not follow John van Seters in his notion that these traditions of the ancestors were first formulated in the exile.⁷ But there is no doubt that the promissory narratives of Genesis received enormous attention and were found to be pertinent in this context. It is when all seemed lost in the face of the totalizing empire that Israel is driven deep into its narrative past, in order to have an identity apart from the offer of Babylon.

And while there are important historical-critical issues, we may here mention Daniel 1, wherein the self-aware Jew Daniel negotiates his way through the civil service of Babylon by a refusal of the rich food of the empire and a reliance upon the simplicities of a Jewish diet. The refusal of junk food from the empire is linked to his being embedded in a particular sense of identity. The Daniel narrative is an echo of the challenge of exilic Isaiah:⁸

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy? (Isa 55:1-2)

4. *Concerning Persia.* The issues with Persia are very different: antagonism has yielded to supportive imperial patronage (Neh 2:5-8). Nehemiah operates with the credentials of Persia. Nonetheless, when that community of Jews engages in an act of reconstitution, the public liturgical activity is not Persian. It is Torah-based, linking Jews to the oldest memories of Moses (Neh 8:1-12), and culminating in the festival of booths wherein Israel reengages its memory of vulnerability and inexplicable receipt of well-being (Neh 8:13-18). A primary dimension of “re-boothing” is that Torah was read for seven consecutive days.

Thus in the face of every empire which sought to comprehend Jewish identity, one can see this community intentionally staking out public, liturgical space to reenact and reclaim its own distinctive identity. That liturgical act is surely an act of faith. It is at the same time an act of resistance, of propaganda, of nurture, whereby the community asserts to its young in direct ways that its existence is not comprehended in the totalizing reality of the empire.

III.

As an intentional counter-community, Israel practiced liberated, imaginative possibility as an alternative to the circumscribed limiting world of imperial administration.

A totalizing empire is primarily interested in tax revenues, civil order, and

⁷John van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University, 1975).

⁸See Walter Brueggemann, “A Poem of Summons (Is. 55:1-3)? A Narrative of Resistance (Dan. 1:1-21),” *Schöpfung und Befreiung*, ed. Rainer Albertz et al. (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1989) 126-36.

due compliance with imperial expectations and quotas. Such hegemony, however, cannot be sustained unless it is supported by poetic legitimation that seeks to define appropriate social hopes and expectations and inescapable social fears and threats. The empire can never resist seeking control of the emotional life of its subjects, for in emotional life are generated dreams and visions that may be subversive of current order.

Israel, as a community with a peculiar destiny, resisted the preemption of its hopes and fears by imperial confiscation. It did so by maintaining a liturgical, instructional claim that its life was not under the control of the empire but under the governance of the Holy One of Israel who rightly and with great authority denied the effectiveness and legitimacy of imperial claims. Israel's insistence upon such Yahweh-driven possibility is not made on the basis of the "nuts and bolts" of political and economic life, but on the basis of dramatic enactment that refuses to be domesticated by "nuts and bolts." Israel regularly invites its young into a liturgically constructed counter-world of Yahwistic possibility.

1. *Concerning Egypt.* The entire exodus liturgy serves the sense of Israel's exceptionalism. Yahweh, as a character in a narrative that Egyptian epistemology would never accept, makes possible for the slave community precisely what pharaoh had declared impossible. The very enactment of the plagues—which make pharaoh a fool—is the assertion that there is emancipatory power at work beyond the reach of pharaoh.

More than that, the liturgy is replete with the protection of Israel, singled out from the massive destruction of the empire:

Thus I will make a distinction between my people and your people. (Exod 8:23)
All the livestock of the Egyptians died, but of the livestock of the Israelites, not one died. (9:6)
The hail struck down everything....Only in the land of Goshen, where the Israelites were, there was no hail. (9:26)
There will be a loud cry throughout the whole land of Egypt...but not a dog shall growl at any of the Israelites...so that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel. (11:7)

There are matters possible for Israel that pharaoh will never permit.

2. *Concerning Assyria.* The link between liturgical reconstrual and a radical alternative ethic is most clear in Deut 15:1-18, which places next to passover the year of release, whereby Israel resists the emergence of a permanent underclass. Both Jeffries Hamilton and Moshe Weinfeld have suggested that this provision of Torah is the quintessential mark of Israel's distinctive ethic.⁹ The practice of debt cancellation stands in deep opposition to the imperial economy, which is a practice of hierarchical power and social stratification. This provision stands at the center of Deuteronomy, a script designed to distinguish Israel from Assyrian possibility.

This provision is more than simply a legal regulation. It is a remarkable

⁹Jeffries M. Hamilton, *Social Justice & Deuteronomy: The Case of Deuteronomy 15* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992); Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

exploration of a social possibility that is clearly unthinkable in the empire. The empire stands or falls with the administration of debt, for it is debt that distinguishes the powerful and the have-nots.¹⁰

Deuteronomic resistance to Assyrian impingement, however, is not simply liturgical. It is also the dreaming vision of an alternative economy that imagines neighbors living with generous, palpable concern for each other. And the energy for such subversive activity is, predictably, grounded in memory: “Remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt; the Lord redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today” (Deut 15:15). Assyria or any other empire would regard this social posture as impossible because Assyria has, as yet, no exodus memory.

3. *Concerning Babylon.* The challenge of Second Isaiah is to create imaginative space for Jewishness. The danger is that Israel in exile will give everything over to Babylonian definitions of the possible. So the assertion: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord” (Isa 55:8). This assertion is not a generic invitation to repent of sin; it is rather a concrete assault on Jewish readiness to accept Babylonian definitions of the possible. Yahweh has another way, another thought, another possibility. Babylon offered food that is not bread, and labor that does not satisfy, but Yahweh offers wine and milk and bread without money and without price (Isa 55:1-2). Babylon thought to keep everything frozen and everyone in place to perpetuity. But Yahweh anticipates in exultation: “You shall go out in joy and be led back in peace” (Isa 55:12).

Babylon had become an arena for abandonment and the absence of God. But now Yahweh asserts: “With great compassion I will gather you....With everlasting love I will have compassion on you” (Isa 54:7-8). The world that II Isaiah imagines is not a world from which Yahweh has been forcibly eliminated. Yahweh is still there. For that reason, Babylonian designations of reality are not finally effective.

4. *Concerning Persia.* The relation between Israel and Persia is different from the relation to previous hegemonic powers. And yet, even with Persia the Jews knew their life was deeply circumscribed by imperial pressures and realities. This sense of limitation and pressure is evidenced in the great prayer of Ezra in Nehemiah 9. The prayer moves between Israel’s wickedness and God’s mercy. The final petition, however, lets us see, beyond the intensity between Yahweh and Israel, a third party:

Here we are, slaves to this day — slaves in the land that you gave to our ancestors to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts. Its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins; they have power also over our bodies and over our livestock at their pleasure, and we are in great distress. (Neh 9:36-37)

The reality of restriction is evident. The text nonetheless suggests two facets of emancipated possibility that remained outside Persian administration. The first of these is an act of imagination in the form of prayer. The prayer is a bid for reality

¹⁰David Daube, *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible* (Westport: Greenwood, 1979), has suggested links between the year of release and the exodus narrative.

that lies beyond the control of Persia, a bid that shows this intentional community not yet conceding everything to hegemony. The second is the solemn community covenant that follows the prayer (9:38-10:39); the leaders of the community vow to act in solidarity concerning economic matters, a solidarity that echoes the old year of release.

The text is saturated with communal, liturgical, and imaginative practice in which a zone of social possibility, outside of imperial regimentation because it is rooted in Yahweh, is maintained, celebrated, practiced, and made visible.

IV.

Israel as an intentional counter-community articulated a covenantal ethic of neighborliness as an alternative to the commoditization of social relationships it sensed in imperial practice.

I do not want to over-emphasize the ethical dimension here, since it seems to me that the liturgical-imaginative effort to create and protect alternative space is more important. Israel, however, cannot entertain or imagine alternative human space, sponsored as it is by Yahweh, except as space that is saturated with ethical urgency, ethical possibility, and ethical requirement. Indeed, it is the practice of Torah obedience to the rooted claims of the community that is the instrument and guarantee of liberated life beyond imperial reductionism: "I will keep your law continually, forever and ever. I shall walk at liberty, for I have sought your precepts. I will speak of your decrees before kings, and shall not be put to shame" (Ps 119:44-46).

1. *Concerning Egypt.* As the exodus narrative is the paradigmatic assertion of community beyond the reality of totalizing power, so the Sinai recital is the paradigmatic articulation of neighborly ethics that counters the ethic of pharaoh. In its completed tradition, Israel understood that emancipation from Egypt was not for the sake of autonomy, but for the sake of the counter-service of Yahweh. And while we may focus on a variety of commands that epitomize such an alternative ethic rooted in liturgy, we may settle for the first command: No other gods than Yahweh, the God of the exodus, who delegitimizes every other loyalty. While the commands of Sinai are demanding and abrasive, they would never be confused with pharaoh's commands, for they are in general aimed at a communitarianism that makes "hard labor" impossible.¹¹

The link between the holiness of Yahweh and the concreteness of neighborliness is wondrously voiced in Deuteronomy:

For the Lord your God is god of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deut 10:17-19)

¹¹Norman K. Gottwald, "Prolegomenon: How My Mind Has Changed or Remained the Same," *The Hebrew Bible in Its Social World and in Ours*, xxv, has most recently adopted the term "communitarian" to characterize the vision of revolutionary Israel. Gottwald has employed this word after his earlier term "egalitarian" was roundly criticized.

It is precisely the God who commands lords, gods, and pharaohs who loves immigrants and displaced persons, who provides them food and clothing. This ethic arises from the memory and from the possibility of an alternative to pharaoh.

2. *Concerning Assyria.* As a contrast program, Deuteronomy makes one of its foci “widows and orphans,” that is, the paradigmatic powerless and vulnerable in society. The Israelite ethic urged here, alternative to imperial rapaciousness, is precisely concerned for those without resources or leverage to maintain and protect themselves:

Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; the Levites, because they have no allotments or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans and the widows in your towns may come and eat their fill. (Deut 14:18-29; cf. 16:11, 14; 24:17, 19-21; 26:12-13)

This social horizon, moreover, is rooted and made available in exodus memories: “Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and diligently observe these statutes” (Deut 16:12; cf. 24:18, 22). Against Assyrian amnesia, which permits exploitative neighborly relations, Israel’s narrative embedment in the exodus tradition will energize the radical economics of Deuteronomy.

3. *Concerning Babylon.* The vision of Second Isaiah, rooted in exodus imagery, broadly understood Israel’s life to be a practice of justice (42:1-4), light (42:6; 49:6), and covenant (42:6; 49:8)—generalities that envisioned a differently ordered economy. In Third Isaiah, however, albeit beyond the Babylonian period, the visionary ethics of Second Isaiah continued to ferment and evoke ferocious dispute in the community concerning ethical possibility. Thus, Isa 56:2-8 raises a powerful voice for inclusiveness, and 58:6-7 names the quintessence of covenantalism as a precondition for Yahweh’s presence in the community:

Is not this the fast that I choose;
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isa 58:6-7)

This issue of inclusiveness is not easily settled in the years immediately after the exile. Nonetheless, the peculiar social vision of Israel continued to summon and empower, even when the community had limited resources and feared for its own survival.

4. *Concerning Persia.* The lyrical anticipations of the Isaiah tradition came to concrete implementation in the reform of Nehemiah. Though authorized by the Persians, it is clear that Nehemiah and Ezra, in the reconstitution of an intentional community of Torah, had to struggle mightily for a neighborly ethic rooted in Israel’s peculiar tradition.

Most spectacularly, in Nehemiah 5, Nehemiah addresses the economic crisis

whereby some Jews were exploiting other Jews in a way that created a permanent underclass.¹² Nehemiah's demanding alternative vision is rooted in the exodus memory, alludes to the old Torah, is aware of Israel's distinctiveness, and requires concrete, costly economic decisions:

As for as we were able, we have brought back our Jewish kindred who have been sold to other nations. The thing you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?... Let us stop this taking of interest. Restore to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the interest on money, grain, wine and oil, that you have been exacting from them. (Neh 5:8-11)

In every imperial context, Israel's peculiar ethic is kept alive, each time rooted in old liturgical memory, but each time brought to bear upon concrete social history in a way that requires the covenant community to act peculiarly against the common definitions of imperial social reality.

V.

I want now to reflect in three ways upon this sequencing of *memory, possibility, and ethic* through the several imperial hegemonies under which ancient Israel lived.

1. The practice of an ethic rooted in *an intentional and particular communal narrative* suggests a community characteristically at risk in the face of a seemingly irresistible imperial pressure toward homogenization. The pressure of triage, of the elimination of surplus people, worked massively against the Israelites, if not in terms of physical violence then through ideological violence that sought always to eradicate Israel's sense of itself and of Yahweh's reality.¹³ I think it impossible to overstate the enduringly ominous threat of elimination that required a liturgy, a socialization, and an ethic that had to be understood as resistance.

a. This resistance pertains to Jewishness in a most concrete sense, for which I will cite two instances in the long history of marginality. The Maccabean revolt against Roman homogenization in the second century B.C.E. is of course a pivotal point for the intertestamental period. Roman triage was not directly violent, but was determined to eliminate Jewish oddness. According to the brief notation in 1 Macc 1:11-15, "renegade Jews" sought a "covenant with the Gentiles": "So they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, according to Gentile custom, and removed the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the Gentiles and sold themselves to do evil."¹⁴ The pressure of a "universal identity" is

¹²See Walter Brueggemann, "Reflections on Biblical Understandings of Property," *A Social Reading of the Old Testament: Prophetic Approaches to Israel's Communal Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 276-84.

¹³On the use of the term triage in such a way, see Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1992); Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity & the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1992), has shown how the holocaust was a most modernist approach to the problem of surplus people.

¹⁴See Robert G. Hall, "Circumcision," *Anchor Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 1028-29.

always a threat to a particular identity; assimilation is ever a clear and present danger.

That pressure of homogeneity and threat of triage by assimilation was directly asserted in an advertisement in the *New York Times* that took the form of a litany urging:

We prayed for Israel when its survival was threatened in 1967 and 1973.

Our prayers were answered.

We prayed for the redemption of Soviet Jewry during the dark years of Communism.

Our prayers were answered.

We prayed for the release of Syrian Jewry, hostages to a most aggressive regime.

Our prayers were answered.

Now it is time to recite a prayer for ourselves—an embattled American Jewry....Our birthrate is too low and our rate of intermarriage too high. The real question is will we survive?¹⁵

I make no judgment about this ad or its ideology. I simply note that the issue of a distinct community of character recurs among the heirs of ancient Israel.

b. Our ultimate concern in this essay, however, is for the distinctive ethic of the Christian church. The end of Christendom in western Europe and in the United States is likely a good thing. The question remains, however: How shall we practice a distinctive ethic of humanness in a society massively driven by the forces of the market economy toward an ethic of individualism that issues in social indifference and anti-neighborliness? It is obvious that the position of the church in the United States directly parallels neither the position in the empire of ancient Israel nor the dangerous exposure of current Judaism. Still, what might have passed for a “Christian ethic” in the period of Christendom has now been thoroughly permeated by secularism in both its liberal and conservative modes. Therefore, attentiveness to peculiar narrative identity seems to me an urgent practical enterprise for a religious community that is often so bland that it loses its *raison d’être*. The issue is to practice a peculiar identity that is not craven in the face of the moralisms of the right or the left.

c. An ethic of resistance was regularly needed in ancient Israel; it is, in my judgment, needed now by a deposed church in the west; it is also needed to combat the power of corporate capitalism, supported as that is by military and technological power as part of the westernization of the world. Around the globe, local communities with peculiar identities and destinies are profoundly under threat from “the money government” that has no patience with or regard for rooted communities. Thus, the issue of ideological triage and the capacity for locally rooted resistance is not singularly a Jewish question or a church question; it has become a question for the shape and viability of humanness in a drastically re-organized world. For Christians and Jews who are situated in and beneficiaries of the expanding world economy, attentiveness to, appreciation for, and support

¹⁵“A Prayer for the Continuity of American Jewish Life,” *New York Times*, 6 September 1996.

of local resistance—which may take many forms—is an issue of paramount importance.

2. Because I have framed my discussion in terms of *local resistance to universalizing pressures*, a framing I think unavoidable in the Old Testament, I must also ask whether such an approach is inevitably sectarian, concerned with funding and authorizing a separatist community. In the instant, I suspect that this approach to ethics is inevitably aimed at the particularity of the community. And certainly the primary concern of the Old Testament is the assertion and maintenance of the distinctive community of Israel. Moreover, I believe that a particularistic ethic of resistance is now urgent in light of the massive power of the Coca Cola-ization of the world.

Having acknowledged that much, two important qualifications are in order: First, Israel did not live, over time, in a cultural and liturgical vacuum. It was endlessly engaged in interaction with other cultures and regularly appropriated things from the very forces it intended to critique and resist; thus, the materials for this distinctive ethic in the sixth century were very different from what purports to be thirteenth-century resistance. The process of deciding what to appropriate (and how) in the midst of resistance is completely hidden from us. The dual process of resistance and appropriation is unmistakable. Thus, for example, Hosea seems to mount a polemic against “fertility religion,” but does so by a Yahwistic appeal to the modes and images of fertility.¹⁶

Second, while it is not primary, it is evident that Israel’s distinctive identity and ethic are an offer, summons, and invitation to the world around it (that is, the imperial world) to share its neighbor ethic. While the texts characteristically focus on immediate concrete crises, it is equally clear that Israel’s long-term hope is that the impossible possibility of covenant, rooted in the Creator’s practice of steadfast love and justice, can and will be enacted everywhere. Characteristically Israel believes and trusts that an anti-neighbor ethic cannot prevail and that the gods who legitimate such an ethic will be defeated. Israel understands itself at Sinai to be at the edge of Yahweh’s coming rule, which will indeed reach to the ends of the earth, so that kings and princes will end their futility and join in doxological obedience—the very doxological obedience that is definitional for Israel’s life. At its best (but not always), this deep hope is free from Israel’s own ideological benefit. That is, the coming rule is a rule of Yahweh for the benefit of all, not a rule of preference for Israel.

3. I conclude with a reference to Jacob Neusner. In his study of Jewish ritual practice, Neusner judges that the stylized gestures and words of ritual are aids in the daily work of being “Jews through the power of our imagination.”¹⁷ Indeed, Neusner opines that Jewishness is hazardous and venturesome enough that it requires a daily act of imagination, without which there would not be Jews.

¹⁶See Walter Harrelson, *From Fertility Cult to Worship: A Reassessment for the Modern Church of the Worship of Ancient Israel* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969).

¹⁷Jacob Neusner, *The Enchantments of Judaism: Rites of Transformation from Birth through Death* (New York: Basic Books, 1987) 211-16 and *passim*.

I propose that in Christendom Christians needed no such effort, for identity simply came with the territory, as it always does for dominant faith. The deposition of Christian faith in the west, however, makes the community of the baptized a community more fully dependent upon daily acts of imagination for the maintenance of identity. The daily acts evoking Christian identity are likely to be ethical as well as liturgical. The beginning point is the recognition that clear identity is not a cultural given, as it might have been in former times of domination, but is now an oddness that requires courageous intentionality. ⊕