



From Biblical Narrative to Economic Policy *Economic Crisis and Conversion*



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In the Bible Israel always has the hard work of transposing its treasured narrative memory into contemporary practice. It keeps *treasured narrative memory* and *contemporary practice* together by sustained acts of *liturgical imagination*. That liturgical imagination, regularly performed, is designed to raise the question from mesmerized children, “What is this about?”

And when your children ask you, “What do you mean by this observance?” (Ex. 12:26)

You shall tell your children that day... (Ex. 13:8)

When in the future your child asks you, “What does this mean?” (Ex. 13:14)

The answer to the child’s questions to perform the liturgy and to have adults capable of contemporary interpretation:

You shall say, “It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.” (Ex. 12:27).

You shall tell your children that day, “It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.” (Ex. 13:8).

You shall answer, “By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt from the house of slavery. When pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human firstborn to the first born of animals.” (Ex. 13:14).

The exchange of child and parent is designed, via Passover, to make a compelling encounter between *what is remembered* and *what is performed*.

I.

The treasured narrative memory of Israel is so familiar that we scarcely notice that it is not really a “religious” memory. It is a political-economic memory about the time when we were slaves in pharaoh’s Egypt. Israel can remember the oppressive circumstance when we were nothing more than instruments for the acquisitive economics of pharaoh (Ex. 5:4-19). We were busy making bricks in order to build pyramids that would bestow grand immortality, and busy building granaries where Pharaoh could store and exhibit his economic monopoly as he controlled the world’s food supply. We remember the pain and the sweat and the resentment and the anger and the foul smell of the huts in which we had to live.

We are able to remember that there was a dramatic contest between the intelligence community of pharaoh (now called “magicians”) and the daring challenge of Moses who had no credentials. We had heard about the contest that

played to a draw as they both turned water to blood, and as they had an even score in frog production. We heard, in the third contest, that Moses bested the magicians because they could not produce gnats (Ex. 8:18). They had reached the limit of their productive capacity. After that, the alternative of Moses opened up. Some of us trusted Moses, many doubted him, and some simply refused. The ones who trusted followed him that dark night of death, reached the waters, and crossed. The memory was sealed as Miriam and the other women danced the dance of YHWH, the God of economic emancipation:

The Lord will reign forever and ever (Ex. 15:18).

We headed out to a new world, and departed pharaoh.

The memory, so vivid to us, culminated at Sinai. The mountain was filled with holy smoke and holy trembling. But we did not care. We knew it was better than being with pharaoh. We assented, in a blank check, to the new rules of YHWH, because we knew they would be better than the old quotas of pharaoh (Ex. 19:8). Right from the mountain we heard the holy voice of covenant speak to us ten times about the love of God and love of neighbor (Ex. 20:2-17). We pledged our loyalty and in that instant were converted from a company of weary slaves to a people summoned to neighborliness (Ex. 24:3, 7). It was a transformation wrought by the holy power of YHWH; but we gladly signed on.

The most interesting facet of our treasured narrative memory is how we got from the waters of Egypt to the trembling of Sinai. We had to trek all of three long chapters to get there, and we were without water or bread or meat on the way (Ex. 16-18). In response to our constant griping, Moses and then YHWH answered with the surprise of life. We had thought there were no viable life support systems in the wilderness. But it turns out that even there the God of covenantal freedom could perform an economic act of bread...enough for all, not too much, and even a provision for seventh day bread so that we did not need to work on Sabbath (Ex. 16:13-36).

This is the narrative memory we deeply treasure. We treasure it so much that we teach our kids and we regularly perform it in order to recall why this night is different from all other nights. It is the night of death and of new life. It is the night of departure. It turns out to be the event of abundant bread. And before we finished, the narrative led us to new promises and pledges of loyalty to neighborly justice. The trek from *slavery* through *abundance* to *covenant* is one we made in wonder. And we keep making it, always again in wonder. And every time we perform it well, it is yet again an awesome miracle that we can hardly trust.

It turns out, for us, that there is a familiar US version of that narrative memory shared by Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and secularists in a Euro-white casting.¹ It continues to be a narrative of departure from religious oppression for a better economic opportunity; and the replay features YHWH as the God of liberty and the new community of possibility. We can recite Columbus and the Mayflower and Jamestown and the Pilgrims and the Puritans and the “city set on a hill,” and we have no doubt at all concerning our national connection to the God of the promised land:

O beautiful for pilgrim feet, whose stern impassioned stress

A thoroughfare for freedom beat across the wilderness!
America! America! God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law!

O beautiful for patriot dream that sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears!
America! America! God shed his grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea!

We sing this belated version of our Manifest Destiny. It is serious reuse of the older narrative and we do not doubt that the God of liberty and covenantal justice and mercy and compassion continues to be the primal agent in our history. That version was primarily Protestant; we have, however, all appropriated it. We have gathered around it a mix of deep faith and patriotic pride, sure that this radical God willed a revolution in public power that ends in practices of peace and prosperity with liberty and justice for all.

II.

It was not easy in ancient Israel to continue to perform this treasured narrative memory in a faithful way; that performance required a great deal of courage and passion to enact the memory in contemporary life. Israel had been called by God, chosen to be a holy, peculiar people in the world. But Israel could readily observe that other ways in the world worked very well, often better than their own. They noticed the way of technological religion that they called “Canaanite,” and the ways of power politics. They wanted, they said, to be “like the other nations” (I Sam. 85, 20). They were ready to compromise their distinctive way in the world in order to sign on for other ways that seemed more effective. It depends on how you line out it. You could say that energy for their treasured narrative memory slowly *eroded* over time. Or you could say that the performance of the memory was *abruptly interrupted*. Either way, it is King Solomon who is presented in the Bible as the great eroder or the great interrupter who experimented with a more ordinary way in the world.²

Perhaps he learned something of the new way from his own father David who is a multivalent figure in ancient Israel. More likely he learned a great deal from his father-in-law, pharaoh. He learned about bureaucratic administration and about organizational complexity, and about harnessing religion to the aims of power, and about transposing ideology into propaganda into liturgy. The outcome of his new venture as to establish a governance in Jerusalem that would rival the other great governances in his world, to be like the other nations and even to outdo the other nations.

The goal of such governance, he observed from his father-in-law and from the other models close at hand, was accumulation. The Israelite story had begun in Pharaoh’s accumulation and now the same practice emerged within Israel itself. Thus we are told that Solomon accumulated horses and chariots (arms), gold and silver, wives and concubines (I Kings 10:23-11:3). He accumulated thousands

of proverbs so he gained a near-monopoly on wisdom (I Kings 4:29-34). He applied much of the gold he had accumulated to his new temple that was a structure of aggrandizement for the regime. He borrowed the pattern for the temple from outside Israel. It was a three-chambered complex with degrees of holiness that reflected the stratification of his urban society (I Kings 6:1-6). The outcome of it all was breath-taking. Indeed, we are told that when the Queen of Sheba came to Jerusalem on a trade mission and she saw his achievements and his accumulations, “there was no spirit within her” (I King 10:5). Or better, it took her breath away!

In his new venture of acquisitiveness, moreover, the old treasured narrative memory was something of an embarrassment and an unwelcome restraint. For it smacked of the particular, and Solomon wanted to stifle *the particular* in his pursuit of *the generic*. More specifically, we are told that he “loved many foreign women” who brought with them to Jerusalem their many gods (I Kings 11:1). Solomon was a very religious guy, but it was religion that suited his passion for accumulation. And the verdict is rendered:

For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David (I Kings 11:4).

That is, he forgot the first commandment concerning “no other gods.” He forgot the God who stood behind that first commandment, the one who “brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” He forgot the God of the exodus and he forgot that exodus. He forgot the God of the first commandment and the covenant of Sinai. He forgot the old treasured narrative memory, and ceased to perform it. He forgot it by carelessness; or he scuttled it deliberately because it did not serve his ideology of acquisitiveness. We may, then, record Solomon as the *great forgetter*, and note the Solomonic disease of amnesia concerning the old treasured narrative memory.

The analogue is obvious in US society. Our own reuse of the treasured narrative memory became truncated in more recent time. There were of course occasional reminders of the old memory from Walter Rauschenbusch and Martin Luther King and Daniel Berrigan and Jim Wallace and their ilk. But as the US economy has turned the corner towards imperialism and its companion, consumerism, the narrative has become remote from serious discourse. “Pilgrim feet” and “patriots’ dreams” and even “alabaster cities” and “brotherhood” seem now remote and archaic, better left to safe spheres like family values in suburban contexts. Because there are other matters to which to attend, matters of market share and natural resources and stocks and bonds and investments and leverage and welfare reform and market ideology, and all the slogans and practices that put us on the path of unrestrained acquisitiveness that has no patience for the neighborhood. As local ownership yielded to large corporations and as stock holders turned their investments over to anonymous managers, the fabric of covenantal neighborliness disappeared from the public scene and with it the graces of generosity and hospitality.

The treasured narrative memory soon enough yielded to a new account of

reality that affirmed that “greed is good,” that “there is no free lunch,” that your neighbor is a competitor for limited goods or a threat or at least an inconvenience, and you had better look out for number 1. The treasured narrative memory over time was transposed into a narrative of “democratic capitalism,” much more capitalist than democratic, overtaken by a market ideology and an aggressive practice of market control and a monopoly of natural resources. In a season of amnesia about the old narrative memory, the president of the United States can and must regularly sign off, “God bless America.” But of course that mantra must remain without exegesis and remain completely generic, because to tie it to Sinai demands or any specificity would offend the generic sensibility of the managers of the new economy. Solomon managed the necessary amnesia to shift Israel away from its foundational narrative. And we, in our society, come close to a parallel amnesia. Without that energizing, restraining memory, everything becomes possible, everything except neighborliness.

III.

There will be a reckoning, says the treasured narrative memory, for rapacious, acquisitive economics. The model is the disaster that befell pharaoh in the Exodus narrative. He could not sustain his practice in the face of YHWH’s will for emancipation. In the covenantal judgment on Solomon and his ilk, he reckoning is figured as *divine judgment*:

Then the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice, and had commanded him concerning this matter, that he should not follow other gods; but he did not observe what the Lord commanded. Therefore the Lord said to Solomon, “Since this has been your mind and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and give it to our servant (I Kings 11:9-11).³

In the case of Solomon it took 400 years to implement fully the divine judgment, but the arc of Gods’ governance is long, even as God’s poets are patient.

Such a way of speaking in our time strikes many of us as silly supernaturalism. As a result, we do not speak that way. But the reckoning will nonetheless come. We call it, as it comes, an *economic collapse*. We are, nonetheless, able to see that the basis for the collapse is greed, corruption, and dishonesty, the very affronts that in the ancient world evoked divine judgment. It is, I suppose, an open question whether “economic collapse” can function as a synonym for “divine judgment.” It is not, among us, an open question whether there is to be a reckoning. For it is plain for all to see. If we agree that there is some kind of moral accountability in the public process, then, a reckoning is an inescapable reality, now as then.

IV.

These three claims provide background for consideration of our topic of economic crisis and conversion:

- a *treasured narrative memory* of emancipation and covenant;
- an *erosion or an interruption* of that narrative in the form of

accumulative acquisitiveness;

— a *reckoning* upon such acquisitiveness.

That much is an unargued assumption of a covenantal-prophetic read of the Bible. But that leaves important questions to face:

Is it too late to avert the reckoning?

What can be done in the face of the reckoning?

I will focus on the contemporary immediacy (or the immediate contemporaneity) of the treasured narrative memory.

In the Old Testament that immediacy and contemporaneity to the old narrative memory was offered in the tradition of Deuteronomy that I judge to be the central text for our general topic of economics. In the Bible itself, the book of Deuteronomy is situated as a late, final address of Moses to Israel, after forty years of wilderness wandering, just as they were to cross the Jordan River into the land of promise. The address at the river is Moses re-staging of the Sinai covenant in a way that is pertinent to the new situation in the land of promise.

As you may know, on critical grounds the book of Deuteronomy is brought to visibility in 621 BCE in the time of King Josiah when the scroll found in the temple—in critical judgment, the book of Deuteronomy—became the urgent basis for a great reform instigated by the king (II Kings 22). We may take it on either traditional or on critical grounds as a reform document in which it is insisted that the old memory has important currency in the new circumstance of the land. The book of Deuteronomy thus is the central biblical model for the continuing relevance of the tradition in a way that we might term “progressive revelation,” that is, the continued contemporary interpretation and application of old tradition. The work of contemporaneity is signaled by Moses in Deuteronomy 5:3:

Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today (Deut. 5:3).

It is affirmed that Sinai is not an ancient memory; it is rather a current mandate. In that same chapter 5, Moses reiterates the Ten Commandments that then become the ground for the more specific commandments that follow (Deut. 5:6-21). In this extended address, Moses shows how the *tradition of covenant* is to be practiced in *a land of enormous wealth and prosperity*. In sum Moses expounds two programmatic convictions.

On the one hand, the land of well-being and prosperity is enormously *seductive*; if you are not alert, the wealth of the land will talk you out of our identity. You will forget who you are and you will become simply another affluent Canaanite. Thus the speech of Moses is filled with warning, “Take heed.” It is particularly a warning against amnesia, for affluence produces amnesia:

When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant, and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you

do not *forget* the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Deut. 6:10-12).

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you.

Take care that you do not *forget* the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, *forgetting* the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.” But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. (Deut. 8:7-18).

The land is filled with Canaanites, with Canaanite fruitfulness, Canaanite production, and Canaanite religion, all of which are seductive. It is not necessary to think that everything Canaanite is degenerate. No, rather things “Canaanite” are self-contained without reference to Anyone more ultimate outside the system. Because the Canaanite system was so attractive, it functioned to seduce Israel.

On the other hand, says Moses, the land of Canaan is *transformable*. That is why the commandments are issued with such urgency. The land that is so prosperous and inviting can indeed be transformed into a viable working neighborhood. That is the import of the commandments that follow. They are specific disciplines to be taken seriously as concrete steps for societal transformation.

Given both the *warning about seduction* and the *affirmation about transformation*, the tradition of Deuteronomy itself is an *antidote to amnesia*, a sustained act of remembering:

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.
Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at

home and when you are way, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deut. 6:6-9).

I call this “saturation education,” when the learning community is surrounded by signs and reminders of a particular work to do and a peculiar destiny to live.⁴ The tradition of Deuteronomy believes that concrete, intentional acts of obedience are the way to fend off Canaanite amnesia. Thus Deuteronomy is an anticipation of the fine exposition recently offered by Michael Fishbane of the disciplined practices of Judaism in his book, *Sacred Attunement*.⁵ His thesis is that the characteristic disciplines of Judaism serve to keep one “attuned” to the truth of God, keep one “mindful” of being a Jew. Fishbane avers that such mindfulness is of enormous importance in society that is increasingly “mindless.” So it was in the ancient world. Moses proposed that *covenantal mindfulness* is the ground for resisting Canaanite amnesia and for the emancipated actions that can convert an acquisitive economy into a neighborly fabric.

Here I will consider five specific commandments from the corpus of Deuteronomy that serve to keep the old narrative memory current. I shall follow Norbert Lohfink and Dean McBride in their notion that Deuteronomy functions something like a “constitution,” a way to order and practice public power.⁶ In the preaching of Deuteronomy Moses seeks to transpose the old narrative memory into a workable practice of policy. Here are five proposals for *policy* derived from *narrative*:

1. Moses provided the conditions for *a king* in Israel who would administer power in covenantal ways. Negatively, Moses precluded any king who would be an accumulator:

He must not acquire many horses for himself or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since the Lord has said to you, “You must never return that way again.” And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself (Deut. 17:16-17).

The terms are a direct reference to Solomon. The king must be *unlike* Solomon. Positively the king must be a torah reader, focused on the treasured memory of Israel and specifically upon these Deuteronomic provisions:

When he has taken the throne of his kingdom he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. It shall remain with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes (Deut. 17:18-19).

The contrast between *accumulation* and *torah study* is programmatic in Israel. The tradition assumes that if one stays fixed on torah, there will be no excessive accumulation of power. Conversely, if one’s energy goes to accumulation, the hopes and summons of torah will be promptly forgotten and neglected. In the context of torah, public power is taken differently. The text poses the question, then and now, whether public power can be differently construed.

2. Moses provided a covenantal characterization of *worship*, so important because worship is the venue wherein Israel imagines and performs shared life differently. In Deuteronomy 16:1-17, focus is upon the three great festivals of Israel's liturgic calendar, Passover, Weeks, and Booths. There is a great deal of specificity about proper protocol. The festival of Weeks is supplied by a free will offering that will be shared with the entire community:

Rejoice before the Lord your God — you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levite resident in your towns, as well as the strangers, the orphans, and the widows who are among you (Deut. 16:11).

It is no wonder that the guideline concludes with a narrative reference:

Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and diligently observe these statutes (16:12).

Concerning the festival of Booths, Moses provides:

Rejoice during your festival, you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, as well as the Levite, the strangers, the orphans, and the widows resident in your towns you shall surely celebrate (16:14).

The summons at harvest time is to share the produce of grain and wine with the entire community, most especially the vulnerable. The summary admonition is this:

They shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed (16:16).

The festivals are a performance of blessed materialism in which the community at worship reiterates and emphasizes the intense solidarity between have and have nots. The reference to exodus in the festival of Weeks and the fact that Passover is recital of exodus shows how the ordering of worship is a reiteration of the treasured narrative. Worship rooted in God's generosity in creation and God's emancipation in history intends to evoke the generosity and emancipation of Israel in ways that are congruent with divine generosity and divine emancipation.

There is no doubt that this defining theme for worship is reiterated in the familiar poetry of Isaiah 58. The positive mandate that we recite in lent is about the materiality of communal solidarity:

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?

The negation warns against going through the motions of worship without corresponding economic practices:

“Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

Look, you serve your own interests on your fast day,
And oppress all your workers (Is. 58:3).

The poem is impatient with worship that is not rooted in and informed by practices of material covenantal solidarity.

3. Moses provides that *agriculture* should be practiced in communitarian ways:

When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan and the widow so that the Lord your God may bless you in all our undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this (Deut. 24:19-22).

The commandment names the three great money crops of Judean agriculture. In each of them it provides that the farmer must leave a residue of the crop in the field for the vulnerable and the disadvantaged, the three groups of the disinherited, widows, orphans, and immigrants. The vision of these commandments is against the more recent, more modern “laws of enclosure” that prohibit the poor from foraging on the land of the owners.⁷ The commandments provide an alternative to the tight notion of “private property” that is the bottom line of modern economics, and allows that property held privately is held in the midst of communal reality. The three-fold commandment, moreover, is concluded in verse 22 with a not unexpected assertion:

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this (Deut. 24:22).

The laws provide access to the communal resources in a concrete way, so that the exodus *narrative* produces *policy*. Every time a farmer leaves a part of the produce for the needy, the farmer is enacting a *miniature exodus* whereby the neighbor may enjoy a moment of emancipation. The task of interpretation is to see how such policies from a small face-to-face agrarian economy can be performed in a complex urban environment.

4. Moses provides an alternative way to think about *money management*.

Perhaps in that simple economy there were not yet banks; but they were, no doubt, on their way to a banking industry. Moses’s work is to provide the kind of banking regulations that will assure that the policies and practices of the bank are directed toward the common good. I cite two regulations that subordinate banking practices to neighborly commitments. First concerning usury:

You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite, interest on money, interest on provisions, interest on anything that is lent... so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings in the land that you are about to enter and possess (Deut. 23:19-20).

Generosity toward the neighbor evokes divine blessing of a material kind. Sandwiched between these two claims is a footnote:

On loans to a foreigner you may charge interest, but on loans to

another Israelite you may not charge interest...

No interest on loans to *members* of the covenant; interest on *non-members*. The distinction poses the resilient question, who is a fellow member of the covenant? Who is my neighbor? Of course the question continues to haunt the biblical tradition with the emerging consensus that all are neighbors.⁸

A second banking regulation concerns securing loans. Obviously they were not yet troubled about sub-prime loans. What is interesting is the fact that the commandment makes a distinction for the poor who cannot provide loan collateral:

When you make your neighbor a loan of any kind, you shall not go into the house to take the pledge. You shall wait outside, while the person to whom you are making the loan brings the pledge out to you. If the person is poor, you shall not sleep in the garment given you as the pledge. You shall give the pledge back by sunset, so that your neighbor may sleep in the cloak and bless you; and it will be to your credit before the Lord your God (Deut. 24:10-13).

You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge (Deut. 24:17).

The central premise is that you cannot enter private property to seize collateral. But the subordinate premise is that you must treat the poor differently. Because if you take the only coat of a poor person as collateral, that person will freeze at night. For that reason, at sunset each night the creditor must return the coat to the poor to sleep in, and may pick it up for collateral again the next morning. I suggest that the intention is to make it uncommonly inconvenient to hold the coat as collateral. Imagine on a thirty year loan needing to pick it up every morning and returning it each evening! It is simpler to let the poor have the loan and keep the coat. It is then an unsecured loan, but it is to a neighbor. The second of these commandments, moreover, ends with a now familiar affirmation:

Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this (24:18).

The *narrative* pushes directly into *policy*! The entire economic practice of Israel is to reperform in an institutional way the exodus event, so that Moses envisions an economic emancipation. The verse uses the term "redeem": "The Lord God redeemed you for slavery." The term "redeem" is an economic term, "to buy back, to buy out." Economics and therefore banking regulations are for the redemption of those who have been bonded through standard economic processes.

5. This notion of reperformance of the exodus narrative as economic practice is nowhere more evident than in the commandment on the "year of release" in Deuteronomy 15:1-18 that concerns *debt management*. I end my discussion of specific commandments in the Deuteronomic tradition of contemporaneity with reference to this text, because this text is commonly regarded as the pivot point of the teaching of Deuteronomy, making the most daring, most demanding, and most dangerous requirement in covenantal economics.

The commandment provides that at the end of every seven years there will be a time of debt cancellation. The thought, apparently, is that in the rough and

tumble of economic the social fabric is frayed and neighborly relations become skewed. Reaching back to the principle of sabbath, the commandment provides a time to take a deep breath about the economy and a time to return focus to the neighborhood. The focus of the law is particularly upon the economy of the poor. Here I want to call attention to four remarkable features in the rhetoric of the commandment that will tell us a great deal about economic thinking in covenantal perspective:

a) The law has an eye on the poor who are always on the short end of the economy. Imagine focusing on the economy of the poor!

In verse 11, Moses asserts:

Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land." (15:11).

You may recognize that this is the statement that Jesus quotes in Mark 14:7 when the woman pours costly oil over his feet. Taken by itself the statement seems to sanction resigned indifference to the poor. But the urging of the verse is in fact to the contrary. There will always be poor people; for that reason generous acts must be performed. This verse 11 is matched by verse 4 that affirms that the intense practice of debt cancelation makes it possible that there need be no poor in the community:

There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy. If only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today (vv. 4-5).

Poverty can be eradicated! It is important to keep the urgency of verse 11 and the assurance of verse 4 closely related to each other.

b) In this commandment Moses six times utilizes a peculiar grammatical construction in Hebrew, the absolute infinitive. This device serves to intensify the verb by repeating the verb as an adverb. Thus "really give" is offered in the Hebrew as "give give." It is remarkable that in this commandment there are seven absolute infinitives, more than I know in any other text:

- v. 4 "sure to bless"...bless, bless;
- v. 5 "diligently observe"...observe observe;
- v. 8 "rather open"...open open;
- v. 8 "willingly lend"...lend lend;
- v. 10 "give liberally"...give give;
- v. 11 "Open"...open open;
- v. 14 "provide liberally"...provide provide.

The accumulation of the absolute infinitives evidences the intensity of the act. It is as though the rhetoric indicates that this is the most urgent provision in the whole of the torah. There is a lot of one-issue politics and one-issue religion around. This might suggest that Moses is one-issued. Torah teaching is focused on that single issue, the redress of economic imbalance through debt cancelation.

c) It is clear that the commandment evoked resistance among those who could

recognize at a glance that the requirement is expensive:

Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor...Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, "The seventh year, the year of remission is near," and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt (15:7, 9).

I cite this only to indicate that there is resistance to the commandment that is based in economic interest. Moses knows about the compulsion to choose self-interest over neighborly good. The teaching dares, however, to imagine that the covenantal narrative memory is powerful enough to convert the imagination of Israel and thereby to transform economic practice.

d) It does not surprise that the commandment concludes with yet one more appeal to the exodus:

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today (15:15).

Indeed the year of release is a *policy provision* that replicates the *narrative memory* of the exodus. As exodus was to deliver the slaves from a hopeless rat-race of production, so the legal provision is to deliver the poor from a hopeless pursuit of debt payment. The commandment knows that radical steps must be taken to prevent the formation of a permanent underclass in Israel. The only way to do that is to order the economy so that it is subordinated to and in the service of the neighborhood.

To be sure, there are commandments in the corpus of Deuteronomy that do not so directly serve my argument. If, however, we focus on these five accent points, Moses advocates that *power* (17:14-20), *worship* (16:1-17), *agriculture* (24:19-22), *banking* (23:19-20; 24:10-13), and *debt management* (15:1-18) can be construed and practiced differently, according to the memory of the exodus covenant. It is striking how consistently the motivation for these commandments is the remembered exodus that through these provisions can be a contemporary transformative practice:

-- The provision for kingship in 17:14-20 does not mention the exodus, but it does say, concerning trading for horses (arms) with Egypt not to "return that way again." It is as though traffic with Egypt in arms is the undoing of the exodus.

-- The law on worship concludes in 16:12:

Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and diligently observe these statutes.

-- The commandment on agriculture concludes in 24:22:

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.

-- The regulation for banking ends this way in 24:18:

Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.

-- The practice of debt cancelation appeals in 15:15:

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today.

The legal imagination of Israel is permeated with the exodus.⁹ The exodus is no remote memory. It is present mandate that requires not only deep resolve but also on-going imaginative energy that can transpose ancient memory in a simple economy into a durable public practice in a complex economy. Where the narrative is forgotten there will be no covenantal economics. It remains the mandate of the church and the synagogue to supply the memory, but also to supply the imagination that makes a transposition possible from narrative to policy, from ancient to contemporary, from simple to complex. Moses himself is at that task in the tradition of Deuteronomy.

V.

I wish to draw two sorts of conclusions from this argument:

A. The emancipatory, covenantal memory keeps beating in our ears, requiring that we continue the imaginative task of transposing ancient narrative memory into contemporary policy formation. There is no doubt that the memory continues to resound in the ears of the early church. That is nowhere more evident than in the narrative of Luke from which I will cite four familiar texts:

a) Mary's song is clearly an act of revolutionary imagination. She sings of the economy and imagines a turn of affairs at least as radical as the year of release:

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
Add lifted up the lowly;
He has filled the hungry with good things,
And sent the rich away empty (Luke 1:52-53).

b) When Jesus is in the wilderness, the tempter comes to talk him out of his vocation. The tempter is for Jesus a seduction as was the land of Canaan to the Israelites, also a seduction from vocation. It strikes me as most important that in each of Jesus' responses to the tempter, his reply is a quote from Deuteronomy, for Deuteronomy is the teaching tradition that most powerfully resists the tempter:

-- Concerning turning stones to bread:

He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (Deut. 8:3; see Luke 4:4).

-- Concerning worship of the tempter:

Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might (Deut. 6:4-5; see Luke 4:8).

-- Concerning jumping from the temple spire:

Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah (Deut. 6:16; see Luke 4:12).

c) In that same Luke 4, in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus quotes the book of Isaiah concerning "the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:19). As you will know,

that quote from Isaiah 61 concerns the Jubilee year, the “year of release” writ large. The quote suggests that Jesus is to enact that ancient commandment, thus reiterating the economic revolution whereby the narrative was to become new policy.

d) Eventually, in Acts 2:45, the early Pentecostal church became a living sign of the new covenantal economy:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the good-will of all the people(Acts 2:44-47).

The New Testament witness to the Jesus movement concerns the new economy.

B. I have proceeded in my argument by way of analogy:

-- I have suggested *an analogue* between the foundational narrative of Exodus-Sinai and the primal narrative of US society. It is admittedly a Euro-white construct, but it is so engrained now in US imagination that all comers must deal with it.

-- I have suggested *an analogue* between the accumulative acquisitiveness of Solomon and the accumulative acquisitiveness of US society. In both cases the accumulative impulse has jeopardized the social fabric.

-- I have suggested *an analogue* in terms of reckoning, between divine judgment and economic collapse. I have entertained the thought that they are fundamentally synonymous, whether or not expressed in supernaturalist language.

-- It remains now to consider how the imaginative summons of the tradition of Deuteronomy could serve, *by analogy*, as an antidote to amnesia in our society. I do not underestimate the difficulty of moving from Deuteronomy to our complex economic crisis. And yet, I suggest that Deuteronomic imagination concerning neighborliness and the restoration of the neighborly fabric is exactly central to biblical faith and exactly urgent in our time and place. It remains for the faithful church to muster imaginative interpretation to make the case for a neighborly economy. I dare suggest to you two aspects of such a task:

First, *the public agenda* of such a church is to bear witness to a neighborly economy that is an alternative to a market economy of competitive devouring. For the most part, it is assumed among us that the market economy is a given. I see no point or any possibility in abstract debate about socialism and capitalism. What needs to be championed, in my view, is how the economy can be ordered to serve the neighborhood. I suppose, moreover, that this requires not a grand strategy, but intentional incremental steps.

Second, I believe that that there is also *an in-house* task for the church. My sense is that the Western Church (and here I speak of the church as I know it and not with particular reference to the Roman Catholic Church) has been captured and detained in a privatized sacramentalism that distorts the gospel and that siphons energy away from the main claims of the good news. That is, there is huge nurture and education to be done to see that the practice of a neighborly economy

is the primal agenda of the gospel news. This has been so since the exodus. Jesus, moreover, was not crucified by the empire because he had odd views on sexuality. He was executed because he challenged the socio-economic-political power arrangements of his time and place. The in-house work is to help folk see the chance to be a participant in that divine resolve. I suspect, moreover, that almost everyone with whom we minister (not unlike ourselves) is ambiguous about that chance; that point of ambiguity is precisely the rich venue for the transformative spirit of God. The narrative must be remembered; the policy must be reimagined. Michael Walzer, Jewish political philosopher, has written of the primal narrative:

So pharaonic oppression, deliverance, Sinai, and Canaan are still with us, powerful memories shaping our perceptions of the political world...We still believe, or many of us do, what the Exodus first taught, or what it has commonly been taken to teach, about the meaning and possibility of politics and about its proper form:

-- first that wherever you live, it is probably Egypt;

-- second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land;

-- and third, that “the way to the land is through the wilderness.” There is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching.¹⁰

I dare imagine we are in a moment of acute readiness for such *remembering* and *reimagining*. Where else could we turn?

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Notes

1. On the shared US version of biblical faith, see Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in Religious Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

2. See Walter Brueggemann, *Solomon: Israel's Ironic Icon of Human Achievement* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005).

3. It is to be noted that in I Kings 11:12-13 there is a mitigation of the divine judgment “for the sake of your father David.” In the end, however, even the exemption for the sake of David could not preclude the completion of divine judgment against Jerusalem and the Davidic monarchy.

4. Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storyed Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 103-109.
5. Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
6. Norbert Lohfink, "Distribution of the Functions of Power," *idem.*, *Great Themes from the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982) 55-75; S. Dean McBride, Jr., "Polity of the Covenant People: The Book of Deuteronomy," *Constituting the Community: Studies on the Polity of Ancient Israel in Honor of S. Dean McBride Jr.* ed. By John T. Strong and Steven S. Tuell (Eisenbrauns: Winona Lake, 2005) 17-33.
7. On the introduction and consequences of the "laws of enclosure, see Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957).
8. On the "other" in relation to social power, see the remarkable study of Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future* (Cambridge: Harvard-Belknap Press, 2007). Nussbaum concludes her study with this judgment:

The real "clash of civilizations" is not "out there," between admirable Westerners and Muslim zealots. It is here, within each person, as we oscillate uneasily between self-protective aggression and the ability to live in the world with others (p. 337).
9. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995) has explored the way in which the responsible judicial practice of justice requires uncommon imagination. See also James Boyd White, *Living Speech: Resisting the Empire of Force* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) with particular reference to his analyses of court opinions.
10. Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985)