The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology

Edited by

Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh

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The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology

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Introduction

William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Scott

Not long after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Francis Fukuyama declared that we had achieved "the end of history." In 2001, the collapse of other walls, those of the World Trade Center towers, served notice that history was not finished with us yet.

Fukuyama's famous thesis was that, with the ruin of communism, there remained no viable alternative to Western liberalism on the stage of history. We are still sorting through the rude awakening from this fantasy. What seems clear, however, is that the bland, narcotic world that Fukuyama envisioned, the "victory of the VCR" over sectarian strife, has not come to pass. Theological voices have been instrumental in opposing that vision. Theological discourse has refused to stay where liberalism would prefer to put it. Theology is politically important, and those who engage in either theology or politics ignore this fact at a certain peril.

This *Companion* operates with an expansive understanding of what is encompassed by the term "political theology." Theology is broadly understood as discourse about God, and human persons as they relate to God. The political is broadly understood as the use of structural power to organize a society or community of people. Under this spacious rubric, politics may be understood for the purpose of a political theology in terms of the self-governance of communities and individuals; or in terms of Max Weber's more circumscribed definition of politics as seeking state power. Political theology is, then, the analysis and criticism of political arrangements (including cultural–psychological, social and economic aspects) from the perspective of differing interpretations of God's ways with the world.

For the purposes of this volume, political theology is construed primarily as Christian political theology. Not only would the inclusion of other faiths have made an already fat volume unwieldy, but the term "political theology" was coined in a Christian context and has continued to be a significant term primarily within Christian discourse.

Within this general framework, the task of political theology is conceived in different ways by different thinkers. For some, politics is seen as a "given" with its own secular autonomy. Politics and theology are therefore two essentially distinct activities, one to do with public authority, and the other to do in the first place with religious experience and the semiprivate associations of religious believers. The task of political theology might be to relate religious belief to larger societal issues while not confusing the proper autonomy of each.

For others, theology is critical reflection on the political. Theology is related as superstructure to the material politico-economic base. Theology reflects and reinforces just or unjust political arrangements. The task of political theology might then be to expose the ways in which theological discourse reproduces inequalities of class, gender or race, and to reconstruct theology so that it serves the cause of justice.

For still others, theology and politics are essentially similar activities; both are constituted in the production of metaphysical images around which communities are organized. All politics has theology embedded within it, and particular forms of organization are implicit in doctrines of, for example, Trinity, the church and eschatology. There is no essential separation of material base and cultural superstructure. The task then might become one of exposing the false theologies underlying supposedly "secular" politics and promoting the true politics implicit in a true theology.

Political theologies vary in the extent to which social sciences and other secular discourses are employed; the extent to which they are "contextualized" or rooted in a particular people's experience; the extent to which the state is seen as the locus of politics; and the ways in which theological resources – scripture, liturgy, doctrine – are employed. What distinguishes all political theology from other types of theology or political discourse is the explicit attempt to relate discourse about God to the organization of bodies in space and time.

The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology has a dual purpose. On the one hand, it is meant to serve as a reference tool. Each essay is designed to present the reader with an overview of the range of opinion on a given topic, and to guide the reader toward sources representing those views. On the other hand, the *Companion* presents original and constructive essays on the various topics by leading voices in political theology today. Our authors have been instructed to be fair, but not to feign neutrality. The views of the author should and do become clear in the course of each essay, and the authors make many original claims that take the discussion of political theology in new and provocative directions. The result, we trust, is a lively argument within a fascinating and diverse group of scholars.

We editors have tried to do our part by arguing between ourselves as much as possible. We first met when one did an appreciative though critical review of a book by the other, and we have yet to iron out all the theological disagreements between us. Our collaboration has just so been congenial and fruitful. We chose to work together in the hope that our differences would make for a richer volume.

Our choice of topics and authors has followed the same hope. We have tried to give a voice at the table to a great variety of different views that accurately reflect the state of the conversation today. All the same, some readers may be disappointed by the exclusion of some topics and puzzled by the inclusion of others. Here we must lament the limitations of space and confess our own personal limitations. There is no question, for example, that, although the volume contains some voices from the two-thirds world, the volume as a whole is weighted toward the world we know best, and more accurately reflects the state of the conversation in Europe and North America.

The volume is organized into five sections. The first addresses some of the primary resources of the Christian tradition to which theologians appeal in constructing political theologies: scripture, liturgy, Augustine, Aquinas, and some of the great theologians of the Reformation. The second surveys some of the most important figures and movements in political theology. We have included a broad range of methodologies, ecclesial traditions, geographic and social locations, to give a sense for the diversity of political theologies. The third section consists of constructive essays on single theological loci, such as Trinity, atonement, and eschatology. These essays draw out the political implications of select Christian doctrines. The fourth section addresses some important structures and movements (postmodernism, globalization, etc.) from a theological point of view. The fifth section, finally, provides one Islamic response and one Jewish response to the essays in the volume. If Christian political theologians hope to witness to a better world, they must do so in conversation not only with each other, but with those of other faiths, especially the Abrahamic faiths. It is our hope that this volume contributes in some way to that witness.

PART I

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CHAPTER 1

Scripture: Old Testament

Walter Brueggemann

The actual *historical* practice of politics in ancient Israel, the community of the Old Testament, is in dispute among contemporary scholars; to the extent that the practice of politics is recoverable at all, it is unexceptional and replicates common practices of that general context. At the outset one must recognize that scholarship is unsettled and deeply divided over the question of historicity. Some scholars incline to take textual evidence more or less at face value; some find unintended traces of historical matters even in texts that are judged in substance to be historically unreliable; and some believe that the texts are belated ideological constructs almost completely void of historical value. In a brief essay it is not possible to adjudicate such questions in any detail. My own perspective is to accept as roughly reliable the self-presentation of Israel as a clue to its self-discernment, and to realize that even if this self-presentation is not historically reliable, it is in any case the preferred self-presentation with which interpretation must finally deal, albeit with great critical caution (Gottwald 1979: 785 n. 558; 2001).

I

Given such a cautionary acceptance of the data about the political dimension of Israel's life, we may conclude, not surprisingly, that Israel's political life was unexceptional and no doubt much like other political communities that shared its historical environment. Like every political community, ancient Israel had to devise institutions, policies, and practices that apportioned power, goods, and access in a manageable, practicable, sustainable way. And, as in every such community, those ways of managing were endlessly under review and sometimes under criticism and assault. We may identify three characteristic political issues that were subject to dispute and negotiation in that ancient community.

First, there is the long-term tension between centralized political authority – articulated in the Old Testament as monarchy – and local authority, reflecting a segmented social arrangement. This tension is evident in the tricky negotiations over monarchy in 1 Sam. 7–15, in the hard-nosed political dispute of 1 Kgs. 12: 1–19, and in the effective intervention of the "elders of the land" against the power of the state in the trial of Jeremiah in Jer. 26: 16–19.

Second, there is the endlessly problematic question of the distribution of goods between "haves" (now often identified as "urban elites") and "have-nots," the disadvantaged and politically marginalized who likely were agrarian peasants. The monopolizing, marginalizing propensity of monarchy that reached its zenith of power and prestige under Solomon (962–922 BCE) is to be understood as a comprehensive system of production, distribution, and consumption that featured an inordinate standard of extravagance (1 Kgs. 4: 20–8). It was matched by an extravagant temple complex that gave religious legitimation and sanction to economic disproportion (see 1 Kgs. 7: 14–22, 48–51), so that the temple featured a production of images (propaganda) that matched economic exploitation.

There runs through Israel's tradition a counter-theme concerning the advocacy of the excluded (to which we shall return below) that existed in tension with and in dissent from the self-aggrandizement of the urban monopoly with the king at its head (Wilson 1980). This counter-theme is voiced as vigorous advocacy for "widows, orphans, sojourners, and the poor" through economic provisions that seek to curb unfettered accumulation (Deut. 15: 1–18) (Jeffries 1992). That same dissent is articulated by the prophets who, while claiming theological legitimacy, are in fact voices of social advocacy in a political economy that must have resisted such advocacy (see Isa. 5: 8–10; Mic. 2: 1–4; Jer. 5: 27–9). The same accent continues in the exilic and post-exilic periods (see Isa. 61: 1–4; Zech. 7: 9–12; Dan. 4: 27).

Third, the small states of Israel and Judah, and latterly the surviving Judah after the destruction of the Northern Kingdom, had the endless and eventually hopeless task of maintaining state autonomy in the face of imperial pressure and accommodating imperial requirements enough to escape occupation and destruction (Brueggemann 2000). These two small states were located in a particularly vulnerable place in the land bridge between Egypt and the great northern powers. In the Old Testament, this locus concerned especially the Assyrian Empire that first destroyed the Northern Kingdom (721 BCE) and then threatened the Southern Kingdom of Judah (705–701 BCE). In the state of Judah, Ahaz is condemned for having gone too far in appeasement of the Assyrian Tiglath-Pilezer III, so far as to compromise religious symbols (II Kgs. 16: 1–20). Conversely, his own son Hezekiah is championed as one who withstood the heavy pressure of the Assyrian Sennacherib, though in II Kgs. 18: 14–16 Hezekiah is also portrayed as a submissive appeaser of the Assyrians. In the end, the long juggling act failed as the Northern state fell to Assyria in 721 and the Southern state to Babylon in 587. The practical reality of relative impotence in the face of imperial pressure was a defining fact of life for leadership in both states over a long period.

II

On all these counts – (1) centralized authority versus local authority, (2) covenantal relations between haves and have-nots, and (3) autonomous small states in the face of imperial pressure – the text provides evidence of endless critical dispute and negotiation until, at the last, the post-exilic community of Judaism came to terms with a quite localized authority under the relatively benign patronage and tax-collecting apparatus of the Persian Empire after 537 BCE (Weinberg 1992). These seem to be the political realities on the ground.

Such cautious historical discernment and reconstruction situate the ancient community of Israel in the real world of interest, dispute, and negotiation. Because our theme is "political theology," however, we are permitted, indeed required, to go well beyond such seemingly recoverable historical reconstruction as presents ancient Israel as an unexceptional case of politics in the ancient world. When we go beyond such unexceptional historical probability, moreover, we are led to Israel's *theological imagination* (that is, Israel's faith), which is operative everywhere in the text of the Old Testament and everywhere redescribes and resituates what must have been political reality. Thus it is theological imagination of a very particular kind that recasts politics in this community and moves our historical study into a much more complex and demanding interpretive process.

This theological imagination that affirms YHWH, the God of Israel, as the key political player in Israel, is no late "add-on" to an otherwise available historical report. Rather, in the Old Testament and its imaginative presentation of political theology, YHWH stands front and center in the political process and is the defining factor and force around which all other political matters revolve. To attempt, in the interest of "history," to construe what Israel's politics were like apart from or before the theological component of interpretation in ancient Israel is a task endlessly undertaken by scholars; in the end, however, the task is hopeless for discerning Israel's self-understanding. Such a positivistic reconstruction may be to some extent available, but it stands remote from the self-presentation of Israel in the Old Testament wherein there is no politics apart from its defining theological dimension.

Thus the self-presentation of Israel in song and story is inescapably a *theological politics* in which the defining presence of YHWH, the God of Israel, impinges upon every facet of the political; or conversely, Israel's self-presentation is inescapably a *political theology* in which YHWH, the God of Israel, is intensely engaged with questions of power and with policies and practices that variously concern the distribution of goods and access. In Israel's self-presentation, there is no politics not theologically marked, no theology not politically inclined. As a result, this political theology or theological politics is, at the same time, invested with immense gravitas tilted toward absolutism, because things political become "the things of God," but also deabsolutized and made provisional and penultimate by the irascible freedom of YHWH, who does not conform to any stable, containable policy function. The impact of YHWH on the political process in ancient Israel, in ways that absolutize and deabsolutize, is voiced regularly in song and story, in rhetorical practices that remain open, unsettled, and imaginative, always slightly beyond control and closure, but always short of absence.

This peculiar juxtaposition of theology and politics indicates that Israel understood itself as "chosen" and set apart, in its best moments, in order to enact its *theological* peculiarity by the practice of a peculiar *political economy*. This peculiarity, rooted theologically and practiced politically, is the tap root of Israel as a "contrast society." This same peculiarity, moreover, is the ground for thinking of the church as a "contrast society" in the world.

III

When we approach Israel's political theology through Israel's imaginative stories and songs, it is almost inescapable that the Exodus narrative (or its early poetic articulation in the Song of Exodus: Exod. 15: 1–18) should be seen as paradigmatic (Miller 1973: 166–75). In that paradigmatic narrative, YHWH is rendered as the great force and agent who confronts the absolute political power of Pharaoh and, through a series of contests, delegitimates and finally overthrows the imperial power of Egypt that at the outset appeared to be not only intransigent but beyond challenge. Israel's tradition, as it reflects critically upon political questions and processes, endlessly reiterates this "Pharaoh versus YHWH" drama in new contexts, and relentlessly rereads and reinterprets every political question in terms of that defining, paradigmatic narrative.

The question of the historicity of the exodus event is an acute one. Insofar as the Exodus is regarded as historical, it is characteristically placed by scholars in the thirteenth century BCE, wherein the Pharaoh is variously identified as Sethos, Rameses II, or Marniptah (Bright 1959: 107–28). It is clear in any case, however, that Israel's traditionists do not linger long over historical questions, but cast this Exodus memory in a liturgical mode so that it is available for many reuses and is rhetorically open to endlessly reimagined locations and circumstances (Pedersen 1940: 728–37).

The reason for focusing upon the narrative of "Pharaoh versus YHWH" is that YHWH as a political agent in the narrative of Israel is to be understood as the decisive "anti-Pharaoh." Thus we may understand Israel's peculiar and characteristic sense of the political if we reflect on the narrative presentation of Pharaoh as a foil for YHWH (Green 1998). Pharaoh is taken as a historical figure but is quickly transposed into a cipher and metaphor for all threats that Israel opposed on its political horizon:

- Pharaoh is a figure of absolute top-down authority who operates a political-economic system of totalism.

- Pharaoh is characteristically propelled by a nightmare of scarcity, motivated by anxiety about not having enough, and so a determined accumulator and monopolizer (Gen. 41: 14–57).
- Pharaoh brutally enacts his nightmare of anxiety by policies of confiscation and exploitation, and allows no dimension of human awareness or compassion in the implementation of policies grounded in acute anxiety (Gen. 47: 13–26).
- Pharaoh's absolutism is enacted at immense social cost to those upon whom the policies impinge; as Fretheim has noted, moreover, the cost extends beyond its human toll to the savage abuse of the environment (Fretheim 1991).
- Pharaoh's absolutism cannot be sustained, because in his arrogant autonomy he completely miscalculates the limitation imposed on human authority by YHWH's holiness, a limitation embodied and performed by the role and character of YHWH.

In the imagination of Israel, this characterization of Pharaoh lays out the primary lines of Israel's political theology. From that imaginative articulation, it is obvious enough that Israel's positive political commitments, which revolve around YHWH, include the following:

- The political–economic process cannot be a closed, absolute system, but must remain open to serious dialogic transaction, for which the term is "covenant."
- The political economy that prevails is grounded not in a nightmare of scarcity, but in an assumed and affirmed abundance, rooted in God, who is a generous creator (Brueggemann 1999). Thus Exodus 16 functions as a Yahwistic contrast to the scarcity of Pharaoh, a contrast in which "some gathered more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed" (Exod. 16: 17–18) (see Brueggemann forthcoming).
- The political enterprise of Israel is not to be a fearful practice of monopoly and acquisitiveness, but is to be a neighborly practice in which communal goods, ordered by a rule of covenantal law, are to be deployed among members of the community – rich and poor – who are all entitled to an adequate share. The curb on accumulation and monopoly is dramatically stated in the provision for the "Year of Release" in Deut. 15: 1–18; (see on Neh. 5 below).
- Israel's political economy is concerned for the practice of compassion for the disenfranchised neighbors (widows, orphans, aliens, the poor; Deut. 24: 17–22), a sharing that is grounded in a lyrical appreciation for the generosity of the earth that is to be celebrated and appropriated, but not exploited or violently used (Deut. 6: 10–12; 8: 7–20). That practice of compassion is motivated, moreover, by the recurring remembrance, "You were slaves in Egypt" (Deut. 10: 19; 15: 15; 24: 22).

- Israel's political economy is to be generously covenantal, so that YHWH, creator of heaven and earth, is acknowledged to be source and ground of all that is, is to be ceded ultimate authority, thanked in gratitude that matches God's primordial generosity, and gladly obeyed, so that social relationships are congruous with YHWH's own generosity. That is, social relationships fully express and embody the reality of YHWH's sovereign practice of generosity.

Israel's political life characteristically is conducted in the tension between a glad embrace of YHWH's covenantal mode of relationship and exploitative practices that disregard covenantal entitlements and restraints. These alternatives are understood in Israel as life-or-death options in the political process. According to Israel's best claim, the choosing of *covenantal relatedness* as a political form of life results in well-being, while the option of *brutalizing totalism* leads to destruction:

> See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. (Deut. 30: 15–18)

Thus the concrete, practical political issue of the deployment of goods, power, and access is decisively situated in a deep decision of "YHWH versus Pharaoh." Political decisions are understood as proximate subdecisions in the service of a more powerfully defining decision about ultimate governance that is simply the either/or of Pharaoh in absolutizing acquisitiveness or YHWH in covenantal generosity. Every political decision derives from, reflects, and serves this alternative theological decision in favor of covenant with YHWH that Israel is always remaking.

IV

We may dwell more closely on the Exodus narrative as a model for Israel's political theology. At the outset Pharaoh is the defining political reference in the narrative. The emergence of YHWH in the drama of Pharaoh is an immense interruption, so that politics informed by YHWH may be understood as *interruptive politics*, the emergence of a political agent who characteristically disrupts Pharaoh's "politics as usual." Israel always knows about "politics as usual," that is, the deployment of social power without reference to the subversive, detotalizing power of YHWH. But Israel also makes room, characteristically, for the disruptive enactment of YHWH in the midst of "the usual" that keeps the political process endlessly open and capable of fresh, neighborly initiatives.

In the Exodus narrative itself, we may identify six elements that become characteristic of Israel's self-discernment as a peculiar political enterprise.

First, Israel is attentive to *social pain* as a datum of the politics that is evoked in the public process of power. Israel is not so committed to orderly management that it fails to notice and take seriously social pain, because it refuses to regard such pain as a bearable cost of order. Thus already in Exodus 1: 13–14, the pain comes to articulation in the narrative: "The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and bricks and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them" (Exod. 1: 13–14).

Second, Israel develops, early on, shrewd *modes of defiance* that were understood as methods that did not invite the wrath of the overlords (see Scott 1985, 1990). Thus the cunning midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, in pretended innocence but in fact in deeply committed piety defy pharaoh's decree in the service of their own community: "But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live . . . The midwives said to Pharaoh, 'Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them' " (Exod. 1: 17, 19).

Third, while resistance to abusive totalism may take the form of cunning, surreptitious defiance, it can also, however, be enacted as *violence*, as in the case of Moses' murder of an Egyptian. Moses does not quibble about any theoretical right to revolt, but that right is clearly implied in the narrative of Exod. 2: 11–15. Israel's political tradition is developed in the face of oppressive overlords, and Moses embodies the implied obligation of resistance to brutalizing authority.

Fourth, the convergence of pain noticed, defiance practiced, and violence perpetrated occurs in Exod. 2: 23–5, wherein Israel brings its pain to speech and issues *a shrill cry of self-announcement* that refuses the politics of silent submissiveness: "After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God" (Exod. 2: 23).

These verses are important for the narrative because they include the first reference to YHWH in this account. It is noteworthy that the cry of the Israelites was not addressed to YHWH. This is, rather, a raw political act of giving voice to the irreducible political datum of suffering at the hands of coercive power. The cry cannot in any direct sense be understood as a theological act.

It is equally important, however, that the cry that was raw pain not addressed to anyone "rose up to God." In this peculiar, quite deliberate phrasing Israel's politics of protest is transposed by the magnetism of YHWH into a political theology. In its cry Israel does not know any transcendent assurance or even seek a theological reference. Rather, in Israel's telling, YHWH is simply "there" and draws the cry of pain to YHWH's own self, not because of who Israel is, but because of who YHWH is: an attentive listener to pain from below in a revolutionary mobilization of transformative energy against abusive power.

Fifth, after the evocation of YHWH, the account turns from the wretchedness of Israel in bondage to the odd *hovering of YHWH's holiness* at the edge of the slave camp. Moses, now a political fugitive, summoned and confronted by YHWH, who calls his name (Exod. 3: 4). This enigmatic, theophanic report functions in the larger narrative to intrude YHWH's inscrutable holy purpose and presence into Israel's political vision. This intrusion assures that Israel now has an advocate who more than equalizes Israel's chances against Pharaoh. As a result, Israel can now voice its characteristically distinctive political claim of a theological dimension to its political vision, a convergence that recurs in Israel's life in "turns" that have "abiding astonishment" (Buber 1946: 75–6; Brueggemann 1991). Indeed, Israel's retelling of its public life is a narrative beyond common explanation, surely with abiding astonishment.

Sixth, the political process of Israel, as narrated in the Exodus story, is grounded in YHWH's holy response to pain. In the end, however, that process requires human initiative, so that Moses and his cohorts become "actors in their own history." That is, "salvation history" is not simply YHWH's action, as might be implied by Exod. 14: 13–14; it depends, finally, upon human risk-taking. After YHWH has declared intentionality about the emancipation of the slaves in a series of first-person verbs (Exod. 3: 7–9), the sentence turns to human mandate: "So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" (3: 10).

To be sure, Moses resists and offers a series of excuses (Exod. 3: 11–4: 17). In the end, however, Moses (and Aaron) go to Pharaoh, equipped with a divine commission (5: 1). It is their readiness to confront Pharaoh that sets the narrative in motion and eventuates in the changed circumstances of the slave community.

The rest is "history": there follows the contestation between Pharaoh and the God of Israel (Exod. 7–11), the departure of the slaves from Egypt (Exod. 14), and the peasant dance of freedom (Exod. 15: 20–1). Israel is on its way to Sinai, where it will commit to an alternative form of public power that embraces the holiness of YHWH as a detotalizing reality and the legitimacy of the neighbor as a clue to public practice.

V

I have taken this long with the Exodus narrative and its plot of "YHWH versus Pharaoh" because in this memory (enacted as liturgy) Israel constructs and offers its primal model of the political process that includes acute social analysis, the legitimacy of protest, Holy Presence as a defining factor, human initiative as indispensable, and an alternative (covenantal) mode of public power entertained as a legitimate practical possibility (Buber 1990; Mendenhall 2001:

73–100). On the basis of this model Israel narrates its political life through an intensely committed interpretive process. The narrative accounts in the books of Kings and Chronicles evidence a concern, in the telling of public history, for *continuity* in the flow of public, institutional power; it is clear, however, that the narrative is characteristically focused on certain key episodes of encounter and *disruption* that in a variety of ways replicate the paradigmatic encounter of YHWH and Pharaoh. Thus the primal claims on Israel's political horizon become most clearly visible at the stress points at which Israel's key interpreters and shapers of tradition have the most powerful interpretive say.

The decisive "episode" in this telling is the narrative of Solomon in 1 Kgs. 3–11. Solomon's considerable political–economic achievement is a point of great pride in Israel; he replicated the great empires of his time and is remembered as having brought great wealth and prestige to what had been – only two generations before – a simple hill-country people. Solomon is, in the Old Testament, a metaphor for power politics of the most effective kind: he managed a great trade apparatus, an effective governing bureaucracy, a rational tax-collection plan, a developed military security system, an ambitious building program, and an extensive network of political marriage alliances, all of which were given dramatic legitimacy by his central achievement, the Jerusalem temple (1 Kgs. 6–8).

The narrative report on Solomon, however, claims for the monarchy less than meets the eye. It cannot be mere reportage that Solomon's marriage to "Pharaoh's daughter" pervades the narrative (1 Kgs. 3: 1; 7: 8; 9: 16, 24; 11: 10). This apparently incidental reference may provide a clue to the ironic dimension of the whole of the narrative. Solomon is not only connected to Pharaoh, but replicates Pharaoh and in fact becomes "Israel's Pharaoh," with a highly centralized economy and an ideology of totalism generated by the legitimacy associated with the temple. This totalism inevitably put Israelite peasants back into economic bondage and brought the covenantal practice of public power to a complete shut-down. It is for that reason that the harsh theological judgment on Solomon (1 Kgs. 11: 1–8), the prophetic intrusion against Solomon (11: 26–40), and the political refusal of Northern Israel (1 Kgs. 12: 1–19) altogether stand as a harsh judgment upon Solomon's experiment. The materials of 1 Kgs. 11–12 indicate the reassertion and recovery of covenantal politics that are always vulnerable to exploitative totalism but characteristically find ways of resistance, rearticulation, and re-emergence.

We may mention four other encounters that bespeak the same reassertion of *covenantalism* in the face of *totalism*. In each case it is to be noticed that it is an assumption about YHWH, the guarantor of deabsolutizing of every claim but YHWH's own claim, that becomes the ground for resisting political absolutism.

First, from the perspective of the narrative in 1 Kgs. 16–II Kgs. 10, the Omri dynasty in the north is the greatest challenge to the theological–political claims of Yahwism (876–842 BCE). That theological challenge is most explicit in the contest at Mt. Carmel in 1 Kgs. 18. The political–economic dimension of the dispute, however, is most dramatically voiced in 1 Kgs. 21, in the tale of Naboth's vineyard that features the manipulative royal practices of Jezebel and Ahab, son of Omri. It is clear that the narrative exhibits a dispute between two theories of public power that in turn yield two notions of land possession. Naboth – and eventually Elijah and the narrator – champion an old tribal notion of an inalienable connection between land and landowner in an undeniable entitlement. Conversely, the royal family holds to a notion of royal prerogative in which land is simply a commodity for commercial transaction. The violent termination of the House of Omri indicates the force and the resolve that belonged to the covenantal theory and the readiness of its proponents to resist the conventional alternative, resistance undertaken at great cost (II Kgs. 9–10).

Second, the parallel reigns of Jeroboam II in Northern Israel and Uzziah (Azariah) in Judah constituted a time of immense prosperity in the eighth century (approximately 785–745 BCE). That prosperity was achieved, however, by disregard of the claims of Yahwism, both religious claims and economic claims that were grounded theologically (see II Chron. 26: 16–21). Thus the same social “development” “enjoyed” under Solomon seems to have re-emerged in the midst of the eighth century.

It was in this period that the first of the great “classic prophets,” Amos, emerged, though he had Elijah and Elisha as antecedents a century earlier. Amos’ remarkable strictures against the economic practices of the dominant society are something of a *novum* in Israel (see 3: 13–15; 4: 1–3; 6: 1–7; 8: 4–6) (Premnath 1988). Perhaps inescapably, such a voice is bound to come face to face with the powers of the dominant regime, an encounter narrated in Amos 7: 10–17. In that encounter, Amaziah, priest at Bethel, speaks for the royal apparatus, rebukes the prophet as a political subversive, and banishes him from the realm. Totalizing systems, of course, by definition must preclude voices of dissent. Before he finishes, however, Amos manages to deliver to the royal–priestly establishment one last poetic utterance that anticipates exile for the royal house, thus foreshadowing the Assyrian termination of the Northern Kingdom in 721 (Amos 7: 16–17). It is, however, not the “prediction” that interests us, but the fact that Israel’s political discourse is characteristically a disputatious one between a *covenantalism* that precludes absolutism and advocates a neighborly economic fabric and a *totalism* that absolutizes itself at the expense of God and neighbor.

Third, in Jeremiah 26 the prophet is on trial for his life because he has spoken of the impending destruction of Jerusalem (605 BCE). The religious leaders insist on his execution (v. 11), an insistence that is resisted by the state officials (v. 16). There is more than a little irony in the fact that it is the religious leaders who want Jeremiah silenced, no doubt indicating that they are the ones most deeply inured in the absolute ideology of the temple, thus a parallel to the priest at Bethel in our preceding case.

What particularly interests us, however, is the intervention of “elders of the land” who speak on behalf of Jeremiah by appeal to the words a century earlier (perhaps about 715 BCE) of the prophet Micah, who also had anticipated the destruction of Jerusalem (see Micah 3: 12) (Wolff 1987). This exchange among power factions features a characteristic tension between centralized urban authority and the voice of an outlying village (Seitz 1989). What matters most is that the village elders insist that even Jerusalem is not immune to criticism or, in this interpretation, to the judgment of YHWH and its consequent destruction. This exchange is a dramatic example of the way in which the political process is kept open against the ideological fears that seek to silence all dissent.

The fourth case I cite is the dramatic exchange initiated by Nehemiah in the process of reconstituting post-exilic Judaism (Neh. 5) (perhaps about 444 BCE). It is the premise of the narrative account that the economy is operated by those who practice unrestrained acquisitiveness, even at the expense of their poor neighbors who are fellow Jews. As always, the problem is taxes, mortgages, and interest arrangements through which the acquisitive ones eventually usurp the property of the economically vulnerable ones. Nehemiah's intervention serves to effect an act of solidarity between creditors and debtors in the matter of interest payments: “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 (vv. 10–11).”

The appeal of Nehemiah may be to old laws precluding the levying of interest in the community (Deut. 23: 19–20). The larger appeal, however, is to the solidarity of all Jews, thus an insistence that normal economic transactions must be curbed and reshaped in the interest of community solidarity and mutual obligation. Thus Nehemiah champions a covenantal economy and takes steps to enact it, a proposal accepted even by those of his own interest-charging class.

VI

This enumeration of dramatic encounters exhibits an interpretive posture in which two perspectives or two practices of public power are characteristically in sharp tension. I believe that this recurring tension is at the center of Israel's self-presentation as a community that practiced an *unexceptional* politics – *except* for its covenantal commitments, which always tilted toward the exceptional. While confrontation seems to be a preferred mode of articulation (and perhaps of practice), confrontation is not in every case a viable strategy. Certainly when Israel lived under the pressures of alien powers that had no sensibility about Israel's peculiar theological tradition, sometimes the political process required patient and careful accommodation.

It is likely that much of the accommodationist literature, ostensibly older, is in fact material generated in the Persian period and placed in the service of emerging Judaism in that period (Smith 1989). In the long period of Persian hegemony, Judaism was granted an important measure of political autonomy, though surely restricted and fundamentally subservient to the needs of the empire. The primary biblical evidence for such an arrangement (which required great accommodation) is the movement led by Ezra and Nehemiah, who did their shared work in fifth-century Jerusalem under commission from the Persians and no doubt with Persian finances. The text provides a peculiar, careful, and intentional balance of Jewish autonomy and deference to imperial requirements. This arrangement was of course not a replica of the confrontation with Pharaoh in the old Exodus narrative, as confrontation in that later environment was impossible.

Lee Humphreys and, in a more critical way, Daniel Smith-Christopher have considered the narratives of Joseph (Gen. 37–50), Esther, and Daniel as examples of "diaspora novellas" that present exilic heroes who resist and accommodate in proper proportion in order to make a statement for faith without foolhardy risk (Humphreys 1973; Smith 1989: 153–78). These narratives are examples of political courage that is matched by a measure of cunning, thus properly classified as narratives of "wisdom," a good judgment about how to survive and what risks to run.

VII

We may conclude with two sorts of observations. First, it is possible to draw up a grid that suggests that certain kinds of literature perform certain political functions for this community, with its acute self-consciousness as the people of YHWH mandated to live its public vision of faith in a world of real power.

The Torah (the five books from Genesis to Deuteronomy) provides the foundational account of faith in history, an account that is to be understood primarily as paradigm and not as "history" (Voegelin 1956; Neusner 1997). This paradigmatic account pivots on the Sinai tradition as the alternative public vision embraced by Israel (Crüsemann 1996: 57). This account accents the distinctiveness of Israel as a theological community grounded in the defining reality of the holy God who is creator of heaven and earth and lord of all the nations. Thus Israel's political vision and self-consciousness are rooted in a theological passion that in the first instant does not make great accommodations to political reality, paradigmatic as the account is.

The prophetic literature – including the "Former Prophets" (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings) – maintains the life and speech of Israel as it seeks to enact its paradigmatic vision in the real world of "haves" and "have-nots," of imperial pressure and centralized authority. The preferred way of acting and telling in this rendering is confrontational; it is to be noticed, however, that this account of faith enacted in the real world of political economy is not romantic. It recognizes the inevitably mixed reality of public power on the ground, such that the culminating event of the entire process of Israel's testimony in the Old Testament is the destruction of Jerusalem and the seeming forfeiture of life with YHWH in the world. Thus the paradigm of Torah has a hard way in the "real world," where the paradigm of absolutism is uncritically taken as "reality." The