

TRUTH SPEAKS TO POWER

The Countercultural Nature of Scripture

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Chapter 1

TRUTH SPEAKS TO POWER

Moses

WHEN WE COME TO THE INTERFACE OF *PUBLIC POWER* AND *PUBLIC truth*, the Old Testament is an indispensable reference point. Because the exodus story is the pivot for faith claims in the Old Testament, we are plunged immediately into public dimensions of power and truth.¹ And after the exodus narrative, the prophetic tradition keeps us intensely focused on public issues. The questions of justice and order and freedom and peace never go away in ancient Israel. Conversely it is clear that without reference to the Old Testament, the New Testament can be carried way into privatism and matters of spirituality without reference to the public good.² Indeed, the religious settlement of the Enlightenment has confined Christian faith to the private sphere in a wholesale retreat from public issues.

While matters are acutely complex, it is clear that we now face a profound crisis concerning the public good and

the administration of public power and public resources.³ On the one hand, Christian faith has largely retreated to private, domestic, residential matters. On the other hand, market ideology goes unchecked in the public square, devouring the poor, eradicating the force of organized labor, and abusing the environment in violent ways.

Grounded in the Old Testament narrative and the prophetic tradition, and in response to that crisis of acquisitive greed, the church is, in my judgment, called to its public vocation to practice neighborliness in a way that includes both support of policies of distributive justice and practices of face-to-face restorative generosity.⁴ I dare to imagine that the connection between this ancient textual tradition of *public imagination* and our current *social crisis* is pivotal for the faithfulness of the church. It is this textual tradition, like none other, that can lead the church to imagine (and practice) the world as a neighborhood network of mutual respect and concern, and not simply as a market of detached competitors.⁵

By way of entry into our theme of power and truth, and part of our specific topic in this chapter, “Truth Speaks to Power,” I appeal to the remarkable narrative of Jesus on trial before Pilate in the Fourth Gospel (John 18:28–19:16), a narrative that, as we will see, echoes the exodus story. The editors of the NRSV have provided a superscription for this narrative, “Jesus before Pilate.” In a typical flat, uninspired reading of Scripture, they propose a very conventional label for the narrative. It would require a much more daring interpretive move to label it, as Paul Lehmann has done, “Pilate before Jesus.”⁶ The narrative is very cagey about whom it is who is on trial, but clearly Pilate is placed at risk by the

narrative and by the conduct of Jesus. Pilate is the agent and representative of the Roman Empire who presides over organized power in that colonial society. The narrative gives ample space to the direct, confrontive exchange between this *cipher of imperial power* and this *carrier of foundational truth* who will address that power. Indeed, the “court record” as given here is a charged reflection on the nature of public power. There is the initial exploratory exchange between the Roman governor and the company of colluding Jews who are for a time identified only as an unidentified “they” (18:28–32). But then the governor comes face to face with the accused. The governor asks him,

“Are you the King of the Jews?” (v. 33)

Jesus parries:

“Is that your own question, or did they tell you to ask it?”
(v. 34, au. trans.).

The governor defends himself by distinguishing himself from the Jews as an officer of the empire, as though to remind Jesus whom he addresses just in case it had slipped his mind that this is the greatest empire in the history of the world, the last standing superpower. He reminds Jesus that he is in court because he is charged by “your own nation and the chief priests” (v. 35), that is, by the colluders among the colonized people. And then the governor cuts to the chase: “What have you done?” (v.35).

Jesus responds in an elusive way:

“My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” (v. 26)

Jesus has spoken twice of “my kingdom.” As a result, we are not surprised that the governor picks up on the inflammatory phrase, “my kingdom,” and draws the conclusion: “So you are a king?” (v. 37).

Jesus parries again, as though to say, “You might say that.”

“You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” (v. 37)

And then Pilate, in frustration or in defiance, in his demanding authority or in yielding disease asks: “What is truth?” (v. 38).

We do not know the tone of his question. But clearly the entire narrative has been moving toward this wonderment. And then, as though to close the hearing, Pilate reports back to the Jewish authorities: “I find no case against the man” (v. 38).

Jesus is exonerated by the empire, even against the will of the colluding Jewish leadership. But now the governor has voiced the lingering, unanswered question, “What is truth?” Here is the empire in bewilderment, the empire that had postured in all its certitude and authority beyond challenge, now conceding that what it has most championed it could not sustain.

Jesus had already declared to his disciples, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6). He had already announced that he was the truth. But of course the governor was not privy to that declaration given only to Jesus’ inner circle. Nor would Pilate have understood it if he had heard it, because the claim would have eluded his imperial categories.

In this narrative we have, as Paul Lehmann has seen, the pivotal contest of biblical faith between power and truth:

The rupture of the self-justification of power by the calling into question of all power, forces the use and validation of power back to the question of the ultimate point and purpose of power. This is the question of truth. Thus the nocturnal conversation between Jesus and Pilate turns into a confrontation. In this confrontation, the ambiguity of power and the ambiguity of Presence are juxtaposed. The ambiguity of power is that power cannot of itself fulfill or justify itself. The ambiguity of Presence is that it is at once concretely *there* in the world of time and space and things and an invasion of that world from another world, the world of origin and destiny, of an originating purpose and a purposed fulfillment. . . . The point and purpose of the presence of Jesus *in the world*, and now before Pilate, are to bear witness to the truth that is, “to make effective room for the reality of God over against the world in the great trial between God and the world.”⁷

Lehmann makes a great deal out of the silence of Jesus before the demands of Pilate. Jesus has no need to answer to Pilate. By his silence Jesus converts Pilate’s questions into an exposé of Pilate’s fraudulent power. Thus truth, as it is embodied in Jesus, problematizes the power of Pilate and of Rome. And so it always is with truth when it is an enactment of God’s presence in the world. Power that has been founded on something other than that truth is exposed as fraudulent, delegitimized power.

The narrative engagement of Jesus with Pilate becomes a screen through which we may rediscern the interface of power and truth in our own social setting. Power among us is now exhibited as the unfettered, aggressive acquisitiveness of a can-do society. It is a force that regards itself as autonomous and beyond restraint or limit. It does indeed

sweep all before it. And in its face, the church holds this narrative, this presence, and this claim that always appear vulnerable and without force. It is an unequal contest that is narrated in the Fourth Gospel. And it is always and again the same unequal context that concerns those who consider the force of gospel truth in the public domain.

ESSENTIAL CHARACTERS IN THE EXODUS STORY

But of course the narrative of the Fourth Gospel is not original in the imagination of God's people. Rather, it is an echo and reiteration of Israel's paradigmatic narrative power and truth, the exodus narrative. It is to this narrative that Jews—and consequently Christians—always return, because it provides for us the *essential characters* and the *recurring plot* that is always being performed and reperformed in the world. The narrative depends on the participation and performance of *four characters* who always make appearance in the drama of power and truth.

Pharaoh

There is *Pharaoh*, always Pharaoh, at the center of the world of power. Pharaoh is (or is taken to be by historical criticism) an actual historical character, variously identified as Sethos, Ramses II, or Merneptah, depending on when one dates the exodus event.⁸ Or perhaps the capacity to identify the Pharaoh of the narrative belongs only to an earlier fideistic mode of critical scholarship, since the historicity of the narrative is now in much greater doubt. It is at least observable that the narrative never gives a name to him. He

is never named, perhaps because he is not the lead character in the narrative, even if he is indispensable for the plot. More likely, in my judgment, he is never named because he could have been any one of a number of candidates, or all of them. Because if you have seen one pharaoh, you have seen them all. They all act the same way in their greedy, uncaring, violent self-sufficiency.

Whatever we are to say of his identity as a historical character, Pharaoh is clearly a metaphor. He embodies and represents raw, absolute, worldly power. He is, like Pilate after him, a stand-in for the whole of the empire. As the agent of the “empire of force,” he reappears in many different personae.⁹

He has a food monopoly, and “food is a weapon”;¹⁰ here it is a weapon used by Pharaoh against Pharaoh’s own people:

So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh. All the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe upon them; and the land became Pharaoh’s. As for the people, he made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other. Only the land of the priests he did not buy; for the priests had a fixed allowance from Pharaoh, and lived on the allowance that Pharaoh gave them; therefore they did not sell their land. Then Joseph said to the people, “Now that I have this day bought you and your land for Pharaoh, here is the seed for you; sow the land. And at the harvests you shall give one-fifth to Pharaoh, and four-fifths shall be your own, as seed for the field and as food for yourselves and your households, and as food for your little ones.” (Gen. 47:20–24)

From the outset, Pharaoh, blessed by God’s Nile, was the leader of the breadbasket of the world (see Gen. 12:10). By his own actions and those of his food czar, Joseph, Pharaoh advanced the claims of the state against

his own subjects, achieving a monopoly on land and on the food supply. That land and food supply became a tax base whereby wealth was systematically transferred from the peasant-slaves to the central monopoly.

Because Pharaoh has so much food, he needs granaries in which to store his surplus. The construction of such storehouses for surplus was the work of those who were forced by famine into slave labor:

Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. (Exod. 1:11)

The narrative does not miss the irony that those forced by *famine* into slavery are engaged in storing then *surplus* of the empire. It is astonishing that critical scholarship has asked forever about the identification of these store-house cities, but without ever asking about the skewed exploitative social relationships between owner and laborers that the project exhibits. The store-house cities are an ancient parallel to the great banks and insurance houses where surplus wealth is kept among us. That surplus wealth, produced by the cheap labor of peasants, must now be protected from the peasants by law and by military force.

Pharaoh's great accumulation of wealth—in land and in food—is the outcome of cheap labor. The cunning food administration plans of Joseph have created for Pharaoh a peasant underclass of very cheap labor. The narrative knows the way in which hungry peasants, in need of food from the monopoly, will pay their money, then forfeit their cattle, and then finally give up their land, because Pharaoh leverages food in order to enhance his power. In the end, the peasants are so “happy” that they asked to be “owned”:

Buy us and our land in exchange for food. We with our land will become slaves to Pharaoh; just give us seed, so that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become desolate. (Gen. 47:19)

By the end of the narrative they are grateful to be cast as cheap labor for Pharaoh: “You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be slaves to Pharaoh” (v. 25).

Pharaoh’s exploitation of cheap labor is without restraint. He is propelled by insatiable greed. He has more food to store; and so he needs more granaries; and to have more granaries, he must have more bricks out of which they are to be constructed. Thus, Exodus 5 presents the production schedule for brick-making that is ruthless and without any slippage or accommodation:

“Why are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labors.” (v. 4)

“Now they are more numerous than the people of the land and yet you want them to stop working!” (v. 5)

“You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously; do not diminish it, for they are lazy; that is why they cry, ‘Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God.’ Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labor at it and pay no attention to deceptive words.” (vv. 7–9)

“Thus says Pharaoh: ‘I will not give you straw. Go and gather straw yourselves, wherever you can find it; but our work will not be lessened in the least.’” (vv. 10–11)

“Complete your work, the same daily assignment as when you were given straw.” (v. 13)

“Why did you not finish the required quantity of bricks yesterday and today, as you did before?” (v. 14)

“Why do you treat your servants like this? No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, ‘Make bricks!’ Look how your servants are beaten! You are unjust to your own people. . . . You are lazy, lazy; that is why you say, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to the LORD.’ Go now, and work; for no straw shall be given you but you shall still deliver the same number of bricks.” (vv. 15–18)

“You shall not lessen your daily number of bricks.” (v. 19)

The slaves had no rights, no protectors or guarantors; they are completely vulnerable to the unchecked power of Pharaoh.

For all of that, Pharaoh is consumed with anxiety. Likely it is the same anxiety that produced the nightmare of scarcity back in Genesis 41:

Then seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile . . . The ugly and thin cows ate up the seven sleek and fat cows. . . . Then seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind, sprouted after them. The thin ears swallowed up the seven plump and full ears. (Gen. 41:3-7)

Now, in his fear, Pharaoh resolves to destroy the children of the slaves, that is, the next generation of his cheap labor. On the one hand, he decided to drive them crazy with exploitative work expectations:

The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. (Exod. 1:13–14)

On the other hand, Pharaoh resolved to kill all the baby boys among the slave community:

“When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” (Exod. 1:16)

The narrative does not comment on the irony here, as in Genesis 41, that the one *with the most* is the one who is *most anxious* in irrational ways. His anxiety in Genesis 41 is unrelated to the reality of his food supply. And his anxiety here leads to self-destructive policies that contradict his own stated needs. Without calling attention to it, the narrative shows the way in which unrestrained power becomes destructive, both for those subject to that power and, eventually, for those who exercise such power as well.

The Hebrew Peasants

The second character in the narrative, presented as an undifferentiated group, without name or face, are *the Hebrew peasants* who have been reduced to slavery. They are completely in the service of the raw, ambitious power of Pharaoh, acted on rather than being actors. They have become slaves of that monopolizing power in a trade-off for food that they had to have in order to live. They have, of necessity, forfeited their bodies to the empire; characteristically the empire will use their bodies without regret or acknowledgement. Pharaoh will do so because, from his perspective, it is all about the economy, about cheap labor and production and scarcity and surplus, surely enough to assuage his anxiety! The slaves are the ones who will make the continuing food monopoly of the Pharaoh possible; they do not benefit at all from their hard labor because their assigned purpose is to produce security and happiness for Pharaoh.

As the narrative advances, however, a quite remarkable turn takes place. The silent slaves, pawns of Pharaoh, find their voice. They did not find their voice until Pharaoh died, the one who had been ruthless toward them. But of course, after Pharaoh died, there will be another pharaoh, because there is always another pharaoh. In the face of this new pharaoh (who is, of course, unnamed), they find voice. They become agents in their own history, paying attention to their bodily pain and finding voice to match their pain: “After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out” (Exod. 2:23).

It is this remarkable act on the part of the slaves that set the narrative of history in motion. Most remarkably, in the early chapters of Exodus, YHWH makes no appearance in the text until it is time to respond to the cry of the slaves:

Out of their slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them. (Exod. 2:23–25)

It is the voice of the slaves, newly sounded, that draws YHWH actively into the narrative.

YHWH

It is this *YHWH*, now activated by the cries of cheap labor, who becomes a key player in the story. This character is creator of heaven and earth. He is the one, we confess, who is “The Father, the Son, and the Spirit,” fully present, fully engaged, fully participant in this circumstance of abuse and need. YHWH waits two long chapters before entering the narrative. YHWH comes late to the crisis of the empire. If we were not so familiar with it, we might ask, as Bible

readers, “What took so long? Where have you been?” Perhaps the answer is that YHWH waited to be summoned by human cries. YHWH waited until there was acknowledgment and articulation of bodily human pain. Perhaps YHWH waited until there was human protest against raw power before there was an opening and a role for YHWH to play. In any case, when YHWH at long last enters the narrative, YHWH will become the big player.

Over time, as we will see, YHWH grows more and more decisive in the narrative, even as Pharaoh recedes to irrelevance.¹¹ This YHWH who comes anew to the slaves is not fully a *novum* by the time Israel has completed its tradition.¹² When God enters the exodus narrative, YHWH comes directly out of the book of Genesis. Back there in the narratives of Genesis YHWH had been making promises to the ancestors. It is for that reason that YHWH responded to the cries of the cheap day-laborers by remembering ancient promises. It was also the case, however, that YHWH had been dormant (or absent or disengaged) from Israel for a long while—all through the Joseph narrative. That may well be because Joseph—now the fourth generation after Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—had turned his life toward the pharaoh and away from YHWH. For good reason, Leon Kass judges that Joseph was fully “Egyptianized.”¹³ The God of promises may have been unwelcome in such an imperial environment. Even given such a sabbatical from promise-keeping, YHWH now enters this exodus narrative with vigor and authority.

Moses

The fourth character is *Moses*, so named, we are told, because he was “drawn” out of the water.

He has an unreported childhood after a fear-laden birth story. That secret childhood has given large room for speculation about an Egyptian, royal upbringing; Egyptian monotheism; and all manner of daring thought. Suffice it to say that the narrative has no interest in such speculation. And of course the narrative knows that YHWH, the God of the narrative, cannot be extrapolated from any antecedent Egyptian monotheism. YHWH is a *novum* in the narrative, underived and unexplained. The narrative turns our attention away from speculation about the childhood of Moses to the emergence of the adult Moses.

Whatever may have been his Egyptian rootage (about which we know nothing), that rootage is not defining for the adult character of Moses in this narrative. His first adult appearance in the narrative occurs when he goes out to “his people” and observes “their forced labor” (2:11). The pronouns are important. From the outset Moses is identified with the slave-labor force; his identity and his commitment are not in doubt. He lives in the context of forced labor. He sees a “brother” being abused by an Egyptian, an agent of Pharaoh’s exploitative policies. No doubt the beating of the slave by the Egyptian was because the slave was not working hard enough or was recalcitrant against imperial authority. In any case, Moses—either as a freedom fighter for his people or as a terrorist against established authority, or both—kills the Egyptian agent of Pharaoh. Moses is ready to intervene against the empire on behalf of the exploited.

Having struck a blow against the empire, Moses is a fugitive. Pharaoh, it is reported, “sought to kill” him (2:15). Moses from now on is completely resistant to the power of Pharaoh.

These four characters are bound together in this tension-filled drama of power and truth. Israel insists, in its telling,

that all four characters matter decisively. If Israel does not tell the story, we will lose some of the characters. If the story is told from the perspective of economic reality, it may be reduced to Pharaoh and the slaves—that is, to capital and labor. Or alternatively, it could be told as a tale of order and terror. Or if the conventional church tells the story, it may become a tale of God and Israel and God’s great love for Israel; but Pharaoh disappears in that telling, and even Israel is taken more as the beloved of God than as cheap labor in the empire. Or if one wants to tell a “great-man theory” of history, we have Moses, the great emancipator, but without the YHWH force behind him.¹⁴

Israel, in its telling, presents a map of power and truth that focuses on the two characters that drop out of conventional economic analysis, even as the conventional church downplays the economic dimension:

- *YHWH* presides and makes *Pharaoh* penultimate; Pharaoh is essential to the narrative, but only so that he can be dismissed and ridiculed.
- *Moses* is offered as a summoned human agent in the struggle for truth with power in a way that makes the cosmic struggle an altogether human context of *slave labor*.

This map of power with its four characters is replicated in the narrative of the Fourth Gospel to which I have alluded.

- There is *Pilate*, surrogate of Caesar and surely as much an agent of the empire as was Pharaoh. Like Pharaoh, Pilate is inured with power but could not fathom the question of truth. Pilate is abetted by the high priests, who are Jewish but who fully collude with the power of the empire.

- There is *the rabid mob* that liked to say things twice for emphasis. In response to Pilate’s query about releasing Jesus, they say, “Not this man, but Barabbas” (John 18:40). And in 19:15, when Pilate wants to release Jesus, they say, “Away with him! Away with him!”; in 19:6, they say, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” This mob as a character is not an equivalent to the slaves who are the fourth character in the exodus narrative. They are important, however, because they are the unwitting agents of the empire, the base that exercises vocal leverage that turns out to be a support for the status quo and the enhancement of the powers that be.
- There is, third, this *Jesus*, who must appear before Pilate in the way that Moses eventually will appear before Pharaoh. It is Jesus who brings consternation and bewilderment on the empire, because he embodies and enacts the truth that will not be contained in imperial categories. This Jesus is the human bearer of truth that refuses to conform to power.
- Fourth there is *the God of truth* who confounds Pilate in the way that the God of truth confounded the power of Pharaoh. The agency of God is understated in this narrative of Jesus (in contrast to the exodus story) but is nonetheless clearly decisive. In response to Pilate, Jesus answers, “My kingdom is not from here” (John 18:36).

He challenges the power of the governor by saying: “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above” (19:11).

The two phrases, “from here” and “from above,” are subtle but forceful affirmations that there is another agency

that is impinging on this narrative action, and that Pilate—the force of empire—is not a free autonomous agent as he imagines himself to be.

Both narratives—the exodus narrative of Israel and the trial narrative of Jesus—are told by the church, the first after the manner of the synagogue. It is the work of the church to tell these stories with all the characters being given their appropriate participation. Such a telling provides a map of power in the world and shows how that map of power is impinged on by the inexplicable force of truth. Pharaoh did not expect to be defeated by the power of the God whose name he did not know. And Pilate did not expect to be placed on trial as he presided over the trial of Jesus. Both stories insist that the world is not simplistic, domesticated, and one-dimensional as the empire imagines. And that is because among the indispensable characters in the world is the God who summons Moses and the God who gives power from above. This holy intentionality that courses through the narrative courses as well through our contemporary halls of power and our contemporary chambers of justice. In the service of that holy intention is a transformative human agent, first Moses and then Jesus. No amount of power in the world, it is attested, can hope to be valid or persuasive or effective until this full cast of characters is acknowledged and taken seriously.

THE PLOT OF THE EXODUS STORY

Given these characters, we may now line out *the plot* through which power and truth face each other. The exodus tale is an account of the way in which power is not free to disregard truth. For that reason, the plot turns on the ways that

the agents of power never suspect or anticipate. Such truthfulness is, every time, a surprise in the environs of power. But that, of course, is why we engage with and persist with this story.

The plot begins with a public outburst of unbearable pain on the part of the peasants who have been reduced to slavery: “After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out” (Exod. 2:23).

The pain is caused by the imposition of the ruthless, demanding production schedules of Pharaoh. It has taken a very long time for the slaves to gather and muster a voice of protest. The sounding of that voice is risky; it is the risk run by every uncredentialed surfacing of the oppressed. It is the hazard undertaken by every whistle-blower in the corporation. It is the grievance of every abused person who finally will assert, “I am not going to take it anymore.”

It is of immense importance that it is the breaking of the silence from below that initiates the narrative and that begins the historical process for Israel. The story does not begin with divine initiative, contrary to the Augustinian conviction that God takes all initiatives. Indeed, God is absent in the narrative until evoked by the cries of pain. This story begins wherever there is enough courage and freedom and daring and sensibility to acknowledge that the pain of ruthless exploitation is not normal and cannot be borne. Until that moment of utterance, every objective analysis of economic production in Egypt would have concluded that the pain of the peasants is a necessary, normal, even natural arrangement of labor—the cost of doing business. The shrillness of the cry constitutes an exposé of this normal as wholly abnormal and beyond bearing. Thus, in their utterance, the peasants-become-slaves:

- announce their presence as subjects and agents in history, not simply as objects of the economic system;
- refuse to be a silent, invisible participant in acquisitive production; and
- voice their bodily rage that was not taken seriously by anyone in Egypt who had power.

It is of strategic importance that the cry of the peasants-become-slaves is not addressed to anyone. The narrative does not say, “They cried out to” They just cried out! The sound is an eruption of bodily extremity that is now recognized and honored, no longer to be swallowed as per the requirements of the power system. The hinge of the plot of “power and truth” is in the next sentence: “Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God” (2:23).

They did not direct their cry in that way. They did not even dare to hope for a response. They knew only about the gods of the big house, and they had no hope of any of these gods hearing, because such well-fed gods have learned long ago not to heed the shrill noises that come from the labor pool (see Ps. 82:2–7). But this God is different, attests the plot. It is as though this God hovers around the places,

Where cross the crowded ways of life,
Where sound the cries of race and clan,
Above the noise of selfish is strife,
We hear Thy voice, O Son of Man.

In haunts of wretchedness and need
On shadowed thresholds fraught with fears,
From paths where hide the lures of greed,
We catch the vision of thy tears.¹⁵

It turns out, in the contest of power and truth, that this God is a magnet who draws pain to God’s own self. The

narrative recharacterizes God so that now the pained slaves engage the God who will triangle with them against Pharaoh so that the map of power and truth must be redrawn. God is drawn into the power map of pain: “I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings” (Exod. 3:7).

God’s response to the cry is a big self-assertion and a big resolve to match the self-assertion. In an inscrutable way, God meets Moses the fugitive in a direct, numinous encounter, and God declares God’s self to be the God who had inhabited the book of Genesis with promises. In this self-declaration, this God assures that the promises of the book of Genesis are now operative in the book of Exodus, only now they are addressed to a ragtag company of slaves. It is as though this God is a sucker for voiced pain and cannot withhold full engagement with those who give voice in such circumstance.

In Exodus 3:7–9, YHWH is a big, self-assertive talker. God resolved:

I have seen their misery
 I have heard their cry
 I know their sufferings
 I have come down to deliver
 I will bring them to a good and broad land
 For I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them

That divine declaration goes on for three wondrous verses!

But then, abruptly, YHWH ends the speech of self-resolve. Suddenly, in verse 10 the rhetoric shifts as YHWH says to Moses: And now, you go!

YHWH’s resolve to counter the exploitation system of Pharaoh is extended to human agency, specifically to this

fugitive from imperial power, this freedom-fighter/terrorist. The story pivots on the way in which divine resolve is transposed into human agency. So now, Moses becomes the carrier, agent, and witness to revelatory truth that challenges established, absolute power. Thus the narrative cunningly links *holy intention* and *human agency* in a way that anticipates, for Christians, the enigmatic formula: two natures in one person, two resolves in one agent. The outcome of the narrative mandate given by YHWH to Moses is that none can misconstrue the initiative of Moses as a one-dimensional human enterprise. The outcome is a new contestation about power that had long been perceived by all parties as absolute and beyond challenge.

From this moment on, Pharaoh is no longer free to define and dictate the terms of social power and the nature of social relationships. Pharaoh is effectively checked in his power by Moses' enactment of bodily truth that carries the current of the God of Genesis. The divine mandate given the human agent is elemental: "So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" (3:10).

Afterward, Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness'" (5:1).

All parties understand that the purpose of stating "celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness" (outside the territory over which Pharaoh presides) is a dramatic shift of loyalty and energy that amounts to nothing less than a liturgical drama of rejecting and dethroning the power of Pharaoh. It is known already, then, that the subversive liturgy directed toward an alternative God is an immediate threat to established power. This is a reality known by the killers

of Archbishop Romero and by the white power elite who watched Martin and his companions kneel and pray in the street, a drama of “overcoming.”

Pharaoh’s response to YHWH’s mandate is terse: “‘Who is YHWH that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and I will not let Israel go’” (5:2, au. trans.).

In fact, Pharaoh mockingly said, “Yeah. . . who?!” I do not know the name. I do not acknowledge that authority. Pharaoh is at deep risk—and knows that he is at deep risk—by the bodily truthfulness carried by this reluctant human agent.

PHARAOH’S POWER CONTESTED

Thus power is contested. It is contested through the extended drama of the plagues that are not to be explained away as natural phenomena (Exod. 6–11). They are exhibits of awesome divine power and resolve before which the power of Pharaoh is helpless.

After the river is turned to blood (7:14–25) and after the frogs (8:1–15), the third round of the contest concerns gnats. After the two rounds of contested power that ended in a draw, in the third try the Egyptian technicians (the roster of learned men in and of the empire) could not match the power of YHWH: They could not! (8:18). They are not able! The power of Pharaoh has reached its limit in a dramatic way. Pharaonic power does not run as far as YHWH’s power enacted by Moses and Aaron. (The failure on gnats is like not having an atomic bomb, thus a poor competitor in the big race.) After that, it is a mop-up action for YHWH, with Pharaoh making a reluctant, grudging retreat before the saving power of YHWH-cum-Moses.

By Exodus 8:25, Pharaoh knows that he must compromise because his power is not absolute any longer. He is prepared to let the slaves “sacrifice to your God,” but “within the land,” that is, under supervision and surveillance. When Moss refuses that grudging offer, Pharaoh grants a permit to go into the wilderness, but not “very far away” (8:28). And then, Pharaoh petitions Moses, ““Pray for me”” (8:28). The narrative permits Pharaoh a slight dawning about the new, changed world he must now inhabit in which he must yield small bits of power. His conduct is the usual way of an overthrown dictator who always catches on slowly about the new flow of power and who always makes small concessions without recognizing that the game is in fact over.

By 10:8, Pharaoh concedes that some may leave to worship YHWH, that is, to change loyalties, but then he asks as a ploy, ““But which ones are to go?””

It is as though the tyrant allows a quota to depart and then requires the leader to select who will go and who must remain. And we know, from the death camps in Germany, about selection. Of course Moses refuses and declares that none will go until all go—an anticipation of the way in which Nelson Mandela refused the chance to depart prison early without his companions.

By 10:24, Pharaoh wants to hold only the flocks and herds of Israel as surety:

“Go, worship the LORD. Only your flocks and your herds shall remain behind. Even your children may go with you.”
(10:24)

Moses again refuses: ““Not a hoof will be left behind”” (v. 26). Moses knows that the tide has turned, and he has no need to compromise with Pharaoh.

Pharaoh twice concedes that he has sinned:

“This time I have sinned; the LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. Pray to the LORD. Enough of God’s thunder and hail! I will let you go; you need stay no longer.” (9:27–28)

“I have sinned against the LORD your God, and against you. Do forgive my sin just this once, and pray to the LORD your God that at the least he remove this deadly thing from me.” (10:16–17)

Pharaoh now knows! But he cannot bring himself to face the fact that the truth of the slaves-cum-YHWH has undone his shaky claim to power and has negated whatever legitimacy he may have once had. The confession and the prayer of Pharaoh constitute an acknowledgment of YHWH, but Moses takes them to be strategic ploys rather than authentic recognition. And so Moses responds yet again:

“As soon as I have gone out of the city, I will stretch out my hands to the LORD; the thunder will cease, and there will be no more hail, so that you may know that the earth is the LORD’s” (9:29)

Pharaoh must know fully, must acknowledge, must concede, must yield.¹⁶

And indeed, by 10:7 Pharaoh is the only one left who will not yield. His most trusted advisers know better:

Pharaoh’s officials said to him, “How long shall this fellow be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may worship the LORD their God; do you not yet understand that Egypt is ruined?”

This counsel to the king is not unlike the way in which the advisers to Lyndon Johnson all knew that the war in Vietnam was lost and now could only destroy what was left of

Johnson's political legacy. So it was with Pharaoh. His policy of resistance left Pharaoh and his regime in shambles. But such raw power that imagines itself to be absolute never learns in time.

In the concluding scene of this drama, Pharaoh, now of necessity alert to the emancipatory truth of YHWH, summons Moses and says to him:

“Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, worship the LORD, as you said. Take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone.” (12:31–32)

Power must now acknowledge *truth*. The truth that meets power here is the combination of attentive *divine resolve* and the *bodily assertion* of the slaves who suffer out loud. Pharaoh, the last to catch on, now knows that his exploitative power has no future. Indeed, by the end he knows even more than that; he knows about “the migration of the holy.”¹⁷ God's holiness has departed Egypt and has settled on this company of shrill, demanding, enraged slaves. And so he says in his last utterance in this dramatic narrative: “And bring a blessing on me too!” (12:32).

In this utterance we have the great Egyptian embodiment of worldly power on its knees, in supplication, asking that the power for life from God, that is “blessing,” be given by this fugitive who carries radical public truth that is effective transformative power. This climactic utterance is breathtaking in its recognition that the locus of power has shifted; holiness is allied with unbearable human pain now brought to speech and to active power.¹⁸

A final comment on this narrative encounter. As you know, the text is not reportage; it is, rather, critical reflection based on memory at some distance from what may have

happened. The narrators characterize this self-conscious interpretive intentionality in 10:1–2. Pharaoh operated with a hard heart, that is, he conceded and retracted and conceded and retracted. He did so, they say, in order to keep the story going. And the reason to keep the story going episode after episode is,

in order that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I made fools of the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them—so that you may know that I am the LORD.

The purpose is to attest the power of YHWH as player in the public drama. More than that, the purpose is to tell the grandchildren. This is a teaching curriculum in a narrative form so that you and your grandchildren, unlike Pharaoh, will learn to know YHWH in time. The intent is that you will recognize that the map of power and truth is complex and multidimensional. The story is reiterated in order that the coming generation should not be seduced by Pharaoh's simplistic reading of power that is impervious to the transformative potential of social pain when it is enacted in the public domain.

THE EXODUS STORY: READING AS CONTESTANTS

Because we ourselves are the instructed, socialized grandchildren of these narratives, we keep reading this odd testimony. Indeed, we keep reading it for all its poignant contemporaneity, even while we recognize that it is only a story. It is not a doctrine or a proposition or a proof; we do not even know what history stands behind the story. We

do not, we know, need to take the narrative too seriously, because it is not more than a story. Nevertheless, when we read attentively we find ourselves taken with its profound gravitas. Reading in this way, we ask about transposing the old narrative into present reality. We ask about the four characters and we ask about the plot that continues to be reperformed before our very eyes. We ask:

1. Who plays the pharaoh in our current performance of the drama, the one who acts in anti-neighborly, exploitative ways and operates a political-economic system that is organized for greedy acquisitiveness?
2. Where are the cries from exhausted laborers who, in their exhaustion, break the silence because their bodies will no longer lie?
3. Where is the holy power of God operative in ways that subvert or jeopardize established power in the interest of the aggrieved?
4. Who are the human agents who carry holy alternatives that are intended by the Lord of emancipation?

We notice, as we risk offering answers to these questions, that the map of social power is, as always, dislocated by the truth when pain and holiness collude in subversion. We notice, given such a map of destabilized social power, that the drama is always again *revolutionary* in its potential and at the same time *revelatory* of purposes that are beyond our systems of control. The interface of *revolutionary and revelatory* is characteristic of this plot and always awaits fresh performance.

As we engage that plot and entertain the notion of its fresh reperformance, we see the outcome of the original performance:

- They tore themselves away from Pharaoh’s system, even though they later recalled that his system assured a steady stream of food (see Num. 11:4–6).
- They went through the deep waters of risk where Pharaoh and his enforcers could not follow.
- They came out on the other side and danced for the first time, their emancipated bodies now free of brick quotas, unencumbered by the requirements of Pharaoh. Thus Moses sang: “The Lord will reign forever and ever” (Exod. 15:18).
- And Miriam and the other emancipated women sang and danced: “Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea” (15:21).

They are on their way, beyond the waters, through the desert, toward a new covenantal shaping of life at Sinai. The sequence of the plot makes clear, and continues to make clear, that the possibility of emancipation for covenantal alternative requires a departure (exodus!) from the way the world conventionally maps power. That conventional mapping of power does not take into account the collusion of holy resolve and human cry, a combination that Pharaoh found, eventually, to be irresistible.

So we dare to imagine the church:

1. Sounding the cry
2. Contesting for the alternative
3. Acting out the alternative
4. Dancing out beyond slavery

This is a narrative that we keep reperforming as we have the courage to do so. We are, for the most part, timid and

inured in Pharaoh's narrative. His system has such a grip on us that we stay fixed on the endless quotas of exploitation, quotas of production and consumption. That fix is evident even in the disciples of Jesus. Mark reports of them: "They did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened" (Mark 6:52).

The reference to hard hearts means that the disciples thought like Pharaoh, who had the quintessential hard heart. They, like Pharaoh, thought in terms of acquisitiveness, anxiety, and self-security. The result is that they could not understand about the abundant bread given by the God of emancipation. They are so caught in that old ideology of power that they missed so much of the truth of distributive grace that was enacted in the old manna narrative and that is reiterated in the gospel of Jesus. It is no wonder that the narrative is always reperformed yet again, in order that we may recognize that recurring bondage among us and entertain that the departure from that bondage of one-dimensional power in response to the emancipatory truth is triggered by the cries of the oppressed.

NOTES

1. See Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

2. Hans Walter Wolff, "The Hermeneutics of the Old Testament," in *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Claus Westermann, trans. James Luther Mays (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1963) has written of the function of the Old Testament in Christian faith:

We must understand that the unspeakable gift in Christ is all too quickly misunderstood as spiritual, individualistic, and transcendental, if we do not hold before our eyes its

original in the covenant Yahweh granted to Israel. He who gives himself to his community through forgiveness of sins in his death and his Resurrection, so that he is forever Lord and Shepherd, is also concerned with giving gifts for and directing its temporal life in the world (179).

Wolff then offers four theses about the function of the Old Testament in Christian faith:

- This is the way in which the Old Testament text must continue to speak with its characteristic witness, just in order to show the Christ-event as an eschatological act of God, and guard against false isolation and historization. (191)
- The Old Testament prevents the witness to Christ from being corrupted into philosophy about Christ. (194)
- The Old Testament guards the Christian message from false individualizing. (196)
- The Old Testament keeps the Christian message from transcendentalism. (198)

3. See Gary Dorrien, “No Common Good?” *Christian Century* 128, no. 8 (April 19, 2011): 22–25.

4. William T. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) offers a compelling statement about the political role of the church in the public world.

5. On the agenda of neighborliness, see John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2010).

6. Paul Lehmann, *The Transfiguration of Politics: The Presence and Power of Jesus of Nazareth in and over Human Affairs* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 48–70.

7. *Ibid.*, 53.

8. See John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4th ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 120–24.

9. I take the generative phrase from James Boyd White, *Living Speech: Resisting the Empire of Force* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

10. The quotation “food is a weapon” is attributed to Maxim Litvinov, former Soviet Commissar of Foreign Affairs during the 1930’s famine in the Ukraine, and it was printed on posters in the United States to promote food conservation during World War II. Earl Butts, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture during the 1970s, also repeated this phrase.

11. Barbara Green, “The Determination of Pharaoh: His Characterization in the Joseph Narrative (Genesis 37–50),” in *The World of Genesis: Persons, Places, Perspectives*, ed. Philip R. Davies and David J. A. Clines (*JSOT Supp.* 257; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 150–77, has most fully and cunningly explicated the dramatic way in which the narrative minimizes Pharaoh and enhances the rule of YHWH.

12. See R. W. L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

13. Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 569 and *passim*.

14. On Moses as emancipator, see Aaron Wildavsky, *The Nursing Father: Moses as a Political Leader* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1984); and Bruce Feiler, *America’s Prophet: Moses and the American Story* (New York: William Morrow, 2009).

15. *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), no. 408.

16. Note should be taken of Isaiah 19:21–22 that comes very late in the Old Testament and anticipates Egypt’s full and positive engagement with YHWH:

The LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the LORD on that day, and will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to the LORD and perform them. The LORD will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to the LORD, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them.

17. In *Migrations of the Holy*, Cavanaugh traces the way in which the “glory of the Lord” in the early modern period moved from the church to the nation states. In my use of the term from Cavanaugh,

I suggest that in the exodus narrative the movement was in the other direction, away from the kingdom of Pharaoh to the community of YHWH.

18. Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 149, concludes his study with this sentence: "There is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching."