

# INTERRUPTING SILENCE

*God's Command  
to Speak Out*

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

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*For*  
*Rolf Jacobson*  
*Carolyn Sharp*  
*Brent Strawn*  
*Christine Yoder*

*I am pleased to dedicate this book to my friends Rolf Jacobson, Carolyn Sharp, Brent Strawn, and Christine Yoder. They are among the most important voices in a younger generation of Old Testament scholars. They have been generous in giving me access to their work, their methods, and their thinking that runs well beyond my old-fashioned ways. I am grateful for their work and their friendship.*

# CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>		<i>ix</i>
Introduction		1
1. The Oppressed Break Silence	Exodus 2:23	8
2. Prophets Refuse to Be Silenced	Amos 7:13	23
3. Silence Kills	Psalm 32:3, 5	36
4. Jesus Rudely Interrupted	Mark 7:28	46
5. Casting Out Silence	Mark 9:17–18	58
6. The Crowd as Silencer	Mark 10:47–48	71
7. Truth Speaks to Power	Luke 18:2–3	84
8. The Church as a Silencing Institution	1 Corinthians 14:33–35	97
<i>Glossary</i>		<i>111</i>
<i>Notes</i>		<i>113</i>

## Chapter 1

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# THE OPPRESSED BREAK SILENCE

*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

THE CRUCIAL DRAMA OF THE OLD TESTAMENT (AND OF the entire Bible) concerns the performance of Pharaoh, ancient Israel, and YHWH (see glossary) found in Exodus 1–15. The story begins with Pharaoh and ends with YHWH. The one constant in all parts of the story is Israel, a community that moves from slavery to emancipated possibility. The Exodus narrative is the account of how that movement happened . . . and continues to happen.

## THE STORY

The lead character at the beginning of the story is Pharaoh, king of Egypt. He might have been an actual historical character, though his identity is completely

elusive. More importantly, he is a metaphor or stand-in for many historical characters who successively reenact his role. On the one hand, in Egyptian lore he is taken to be a god invested with absolute authority. From that it follows that his regime is all-embracing. Nothing is possible or even imaginable beyond his reach. It also means that his absolute authority and control extend to perpetuity. There is no prospect for anything outside of Pharaoh's absolutism and nothing after it, because there is nothing after perpetuity.

He is ready to exploit cheap labor ruthlessly and without relief. His strictures against his Hebrew labor force are insistent and uncompromising. The only thing he knows to do is to impose greater demands on the slave force and higher production quotas under increasingly difficult conditions (Exod. 5). He exhibits not a hint of awareness that his labor force consists of actual, vulnerable human persons. His incessant pressure on his slave labor force is in the interest of building "store-house cities" designed to store Pharaoh's food monopoly so that he can accumulate a surplus on which all others are eventually dependent (1:11). He had the shrewd capacity to utilize his food monopoly as political leverage. His capacity to do so, however, depended on his ability to store the grain adequately, and for that he needed slave labor. Thus the character of Pharaoh, absolute to perpetuity, was committed to and dependent on a ruthless labor policy to protect and enhance his surplus, which he had at the expense of subsistence peasants.

And then, says the narrative, Pharaoh died (2:23)! His death is a contradiction of his ideology. The

ideology asserted “absolute to perpetuity.” But then he died. And with his death came dramatic relief from a policy of ruthless exploitation. What had seemed absolute was not! What had been declared to perpetuity was terminated! It turned out that these claims were patently false.

The wonder of the Exodus narrative is that the role of pharaoh continues to be reperformed in many times and many places. “Pharaoh” reappears in the course of history in the guise of coercive economic production. In every new performance, the character of Pharaoh makes claims to be absolute to perpetuity; the character is regularly propelled by fearful greed; the character imposes stringent economic demands on a vulnerable labor force. And characteristically such a performance ends, exposed as false, in death. It is the insistent wisdom of the narrative, always being reperformed and reasserted, that the claim of Pharaoh is a charade. It is, in its moment, every time a powerful charade; but every time it is unsustainable: “[Then] the king of Egypt died” (Exod. 2:23). And when the king of Egypt dies and repeatedly dies in many narrative performances, every time everything becomes unglued, and we learn yet again that there is nothing absolute or perpetual about such claims by the regime.

## THE HEBREWS

When Pharaoh dies, room emerges in the story for Israel to make a formidable entry. Up until our verse 2:23 this slave community is often called “Hebrew” (1:15, 16, 19; 2:6, 7, 11, 13). The term *Hebrew* apparently is

a sociological one that describes a vulnerable outsider population that was repeatedly “the last hired and the first fired,” people who had no legitimate membership in society and were therefore exceedingly vulnerable to the whim of the powerful. In our verse, however, and often in the narrative before our verse, in Exodus 1–2, the company of slaves is not only stylized “Hebrews,” but they are called “Israelites.” Thus in our verse, “the *Israelites* groaned.” Whatever the sociology of the term *Hebrew*, the term *Israelite* is covenantal. Its usage situates this company of slaves in the ongoing drama of covenant with YHWH, the God of promise. This means that for this community, for those in on the sweep of the narrative, the generation present at the death of Pharaoh belonged to the ancient company of Abraham, who, propelled by promise, undertook the risk that they would arrive at the wilderness of *abundance*, at Mount Sinai, pledged to covenantal *obedience*, and eventually at the *land of promise*. All this is not told in the story, but it is assumed in the utterance of the term “Israelite” as in “the Israelites groaned.”

What Pharaoh and his ilk could see were the Hebrews (as in Gen. 43:32); the Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews because it was an “abomination.”

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The term *Hebrew* . . . describes a vulnerable outsider population that was repeatedly “the last hired and the first fired,” people who had no legitimate membership in society and were therefore exceedingly vulnerable to the whim of the powerful.

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What appeared in the eyes of Pharaoh to be Hebrews were in truth, as the narrative knows, Israelites marked by covenantal futures and covenantal protection.

Verse 2:23 provides a succinct summary of the story of the Israelites: “They groaned under their slavery.” They had ended in helpless, forlorn slave labor in the ruthless predatory system of Pharaoh. The old Pharaoh had been friendly toward the Hebrews and welcomed them. But the new Pharaoh (who remains nameless) “did not know Joseph” (Exod. 1:8), was not bound by old friendship, and so sucked the vulnerable Hebrews into his predatory system. We are not told how that happened. But the narrative of Genesis 47:13–25, speaking not of Hebrews but of other people, suggests that it happened by inevitable and complete dependence on Pharaoh’s food monopoly, which made the Hebrews, like many other people, vulnerable to Pharaoh’s predation. The move from prosperity under Pharaoh to hopeless slavery was by confiscation of property and their means of production (cattle) and the accumulation of debt from which the Hebrews had no recourse except to submit to Pharaoh’s system of economic greed.

Their circumstance of acute vulnerability is described as “brick making” in which the Hebrews are pressed to greater and greater production, even while they are forced to gather their own straw for such production (Exod. 5:7–13). The toil of brick making is rightly termed “hard labor.” We know how hard that labor was from parallels in our own time, a process of brick making that likely has not changed from what it

was in that ancient day. Pamela Constable described the process of making bricks in contemporary Pakistan:

The kilns are remote, self-contained worlds, carpeted in thick red dust, where clay-colored figures squat all day in the sun, shaping balls of mud into bricks and setting them out in rows to dry. More than 200,000 migrant laborers work in kilns across Pakistan, earning a few hundred rupees a day. Small children squatted beside their fathers, rolling mud bricks on the quarry floor. Older boys load bricks on the little quarry donkeys, which trudged to the kilns and then trotted back to their own. Soot-streaked men shoveled coal into underground ovens, while chimneys overhead billowed trails of black smoke across the pale dawn sky. The kiln families live in encampments of brick huts beside the quarries, cut off from schools and shops. Most eventually borrow money from the owners and become permanently indebted.<sup>1</sup>

The status of being permanently indebted is by design in that system. Those who owed Pharaoh an unpayable debt were fated to work forever at the demand of Pharaoh. Indeed, when we consider permanent indebtedness of many people in our own predatory economic system, we can see how the drama of Egypt is endlessly reperformed.

The endless reach of the power of debt in contemporary Pakistan eventually dehumanizes and reduces to hopelessness and helplessness:

Many never earn enough to leave. If they move to a new kiln, their debt moves with them. "It can stay with you for life, like a pair of invisible handcuffs," one worker told me. Kiln work is hot and dangerous, and many workers have old burn marks on their arms

and legs. But there is another horrifying hazard that some willingly risk in their desperation to get out of debt: selling their kidneys in the clandestine organ trade.<sup>2</sup>

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For good reason the slaves were reduced to despair and therefore to silence. At most they could quarrel among themselves, but never emit a peep against the regime, for that was too much to dare (Exod. 5:20–21).

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In order to grasp the depth of pharaonic enslavement we must reflect on what surely must have happened to those who were hopelessly locked into the debt system of Pharaoh and who knew that there is no exit from pharaonic enslavement. We can imagine that as Hebrews they eventually forfeited their self-consciousness and their historical identification. Many of them must have lived in unrelieved despair and submitted without resilient possibility, finally going through endless motions of brick making without any future at all. Surely they were indeed tired of living, if not scared of dying, and they saw that every day of work left them deeper in debt and without recourse of any kind. Thus, Hebrews without right or prospect is exactly what the predatory economy of Pharaoh required. For good reason the slaves were reduced to despair and therefore to silence. At most they could quarrel among themselves but never emit a peep against the regime, for that was too much to dare (Exod. 5:20–21).

## THE SLAVES GROANED

But then he died! The unimaginable happened! The kingpin of predation was gone! He lasted, in the biblical narrative, from Exodus 1:8 to 2:23; it must have seemed an eon to the slaves. When such a brutal predator dies, something of the system of predation dies with him, and new possibilities become imaginable. This moment of Pharaoh's death is a pivotal moment in the biblical story. Indeed, it is a pivotal moment in the history of the world. It is always a pivotal moment in the history of the world when a pharaoh dies. Because what happens is that "the Hebrews" are able to remember and compute the truth that they are "Israelites." And their status as "left-behind" Hebrews is abruptly moved to a re-embrace of their true status as Israelites. Thus in our verse it is not the Hebrews who cried out but the Israelites. It is a moment, in the rhetoric of critical theory, when the victims become conscious, when the slaves become aware that they may be actors in their own history and agents of their own future. Until this moment the Hebrew victims had no consciousness, no sense of being subject, no capacity to be agent. The move to embrace the identity of Israelite is indeed naive, but that naiveté becomes the origin and foundation of thinking critically about history and about one's place in it. Everything depended on that moment of coming to consciousness. The cry and the groan are the beginning of that process that eventuated in a departure from Pharaoh's system.

All of this is accomplished in the terse statement

“The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out” (Exod. 2:23). They announced their presence in history. They brought their suffering and pain to speech, thereby asserting that such suffering as their work in the kilns and such pain as perpetual debt are not normal. In that instant, they entertained, as they had been unable to do before, the possibility that alternative ways of existence are available, ways that were not available as long as Pharaoh was absolute and perpetual, for his ways are the ways of imposed silence.

The cry that breaks the silence is the sound of bodies becoming fully aware of what the predatory system has cost and being fully aware as well that it can be otherwise. Antonio Gramsci asserts that this moment of consciousness by the victim is “the small door through which Messiah may enter.”<sup>3</sup> It is a door, an access point that had not been heretofore available (see Rev. 3:20). It is, to be sure, a small door. The erstwhile Hebrew slaves have little chance of such a historical possibility. The vulnerable indebted always have only a little chance, but it is a chance! The messiah who comes is alternative historical possibility that arises from outside the closely administered system of brutalizing silence. Gramsci is thinking critically, not theologically, and certainly not christologically. In biblical context, however, the messiah who comes is exactly a human agent of divine alternative, of whom in the Bible there are many: Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah, Cyrus, and eventually Jesus. But history does not depend alone on the biblical inventory of messiahs. In our own time, that small door of historical alternative has been entered by Gandhi, Mandela, Walesa, Havel, Mao, King,

Gorbachev, and a host of others who have generated historical possibility where none existed.

The cry and groan of the Hebrew slaves was not aimed in any particular direction, not addressed to anyone. It was more generic and amorphous, simply the out-loud disclosure of the unbearable. That declaration of the unbearable is an act of hope. Pharaoh did not care that the slaves suffered (nor does any pharaoh). He assumed that their suffering was simply part of the proper fate of the economically failed. Pharaoh could tolerate their suffering and pain. What he could not tolerate was the voicing of suffering and pain because the voicing sets the juices of alternative in motion. The voicing mobilized the attention and energy of the ones who had no voice. For that reason, Pharaoh is the indispensable, uncompromising silencer who prevents the Hebrews from mobilizing their imaginations and from summoning any would-be ally from beyond.

In this moment of cry and groan the silence is broken, and the silencer is denied. The silence system has failed. Human bodily sounds are made. And with them begins the historical process that ends in “exit” (exodus) and emancipation. All of that is evoked by the wretched breaking of silence. The brutalizing power from above, the royal enforcer of silence, is defeated!

## GOD HEARD

Only now, only belatedly, YHWH enters the narrative. The key mode of YHWH in the narrative up to this point is one of *absence*. For two chapters YHWH has been noticeably nonparticipatory. God did indeed

“deal well” with the midwives in Exodus 1:20. But that was all surreptitious. Only now does YHWH heed the small door of the cry of the slaves to enter the narrative. Only now, after the cry becomes vigorous, does YHWH become aware of the unbearable situation generated by Pharaoh. That, however, is how the predatory system chooses to work: “Without God everything is possible.” Because the slave master is “without God,” Pharaoh finds everything possible. Pharaoh finds abuse and exploitation possible. Pharaoh finds accumulation, monopoly, and violence possible because there is no check on Pharaoh’s surging autonomy. That is how it is among us. The predatory system has practiced permanent indebtedness without check or restraint and can proceed in pharaonic, uncaring, unnoticing relentlessness.

But then, the silence is broken. The groan is sounded. The cry is uttered. The predatory system is dislocated. The absolutism and perpetuity of Pharaoh are abruptly subverted.

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YHWH turned out to be a magnet  
that drew and continues to draw the  
cries and groans of the helpless,  
vulnerable, and indebted who move to  
YHWH’s festival-generating mercy.

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At long last God heard! The Hebrew-Israelites who find voice had not addressed YHWH. As Hebrews they had been numbed to amnesia; they did not know the name of any messiah who might enter because they

did not know of any possible small door. Unbeknownst to them, their groan and cry created that door.

Their cry, not directed by them, “rose up to God” (Exod. 2:23). Their cry, without any direction from those who cried, knew where to go. The cry understood that its proper destination was the ear of YHWH, for YHWH turned out to be the listener. More than that, YHWH turned out to be a magnet that drew and continues to draw the cries and groans of the helpless, vulnerable, and indebted who move to YHWH’s festival-generating mercy. As a result of the arrival of the cry at the attentiveness of YHWH, YHWH in the text is given a full share of responsive verbs:

*God heard:* The cry does not float off into empty space, but initiates a dialogue that evokes holy power and holy resolve.

*God saw:* In the later utterance of Israel’s lament over destroyed Jerusalem the poet will ask,

Is it nothing to you, all of you who pass by?  
 Look and see  
 if there is any sorrow like my sorrow,  
 which was brought upon me.  
 (Lam. 1:12)

And here in our narrative long before, those who groan and cry ask generically about their unbearable burden, “Is it nothing to you?” And here we get an answer. Their cry is not “nothing.” This is the God who looks and sees and takes in the sorrow.

*God knew:* Our translation says, “God took notice” (2:25). But God “knew.” God recognized who was speaking. A textual variant, moreover, permits more:

“God knew *them*.” God recognized the Hebrew slaves who, only as they cried out, could be seen and known as Israelites. God recognized that these were folk God had already known. These are not strangers to God, but they were not and could not be recognized by God until their self-announcement via groan and cry.

*God remembered:* Because God heard, saw, and knew (them), God remembered that this moment of engagement was not *de novo*. It was rooted in the memory of the God of Genesis. Imagine that! The sound of slaves groaning reminded YHWH of the old ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, each of whom in failed circumstance had relied on God’s inexplicable gift of a future by means of an inexplicable heir.

And now this company without voice in pharaonic circumstance relies on that same gift. This moment of engagement carries the identification of slaves who cry and groan back to the old carriers of God’s promise. Jon Levenson early on has protested against the appropriation of this narrative for liberation movements beyond Jews.<sup>4</sup> And surely Jews have first claim on the narrative of emancipation. It requires no illicit imagination, however, to see that the narrative process of identifying those who cry and groan with the promise carriers readily moves into other contexts with other peoples. This God has a wide horizon, and so a much wider population of those who cry and groan have found the text to be compelling for themselves as well. In such an oft-replicated circumstance, the text endlessly reiterates the assurance of YHWH:

“I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me. I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.” (Exod. 3:7–9)

The bonded nobodies are now situated in the covenantal story of unconditional promises, the assurance that they will be led to the land of well-being. The Hebrews have become Israelites, carriers of the promises of God. Thus God, in our verse, moves from *absence* to *notice* to *recognition* to *promise*. It is all triggered, however, not by YHWH’s faithful will but by the cry that breaks the totalism of Pharaoh. It is the cry, the daring assertion of unbearable suffering, that transposes Hebrews into Israelites. Pharaoh prefers silence that keeps Hebrews hopeless slaves who know nothing except hard labor. But the cry makes Pharaoh’s preference null and void. It is no wonder that the initial cry of the slaves ends in the exuberant singing and dancing of Miriam:

“Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”  
(Exod. 15:21)

It is the silence-breaking cry that begins the process that turns pain into joy.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. The king of Egypt, like all kings, claimed to have perpetual control over the people. How do “kings” today claim to have control over people?
2. On page 13, the author says, “When we consider permanent indebtedness of many people in our own predatory economic system, we can see how the drama of Egypt is endlessly reperformed.” What does he mean?
3. The people cried out, and God heard and acted. Does God require groans in order to act? What can we learn from this story for our time?