

JOURNEY TO THE
COMMON GOOD

UPDATED EDITION

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Chapter 1

THE JOURNEY TO THE COMMON GOOD

Faith, Anxiety, and the Practice of Neighborliness

The great crisis among us is the crisis of “the common good,” the sense of community solidarity that binds all in a common destiny—haves and have-nots, the rich and the poor. We face a crisis about the common good because there are powerful forces at work among us to resist the common good, to violate community solidarity, and to deny a common destiny. Mature people, at their best, are people who are committed to the common good that reaches beyond private interest, transcends sectarian commitments, and offers human solidarity.

In my comments, I will consider texts from the Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament that may inform our thinking about the common good. This concern is not an easy or obvious one, because clearly the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament is permeated with impediments to the common good, including the pervasive influence of patriarchy, ethnicity, race, sect, and party, not even to mention the layers of human and divine anger that pervade its pages.¹ Nonetheless, the issue of common good arises in its pages precisely because the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament is the

1. For the deep problematic of the claims for God in the Old Testament, see Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); and Marvin A. Sweeney, *Reading the Hebrew Bible after the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

oldest text we have in the West that claims to be revelatory of truth out beyond us.

So I begin this way:

- The journey to the common good in this text is *a memory* of the way in which ancient Israel moved from Pharaoh's slave labor arrangements to the holy mountain of covenanting at Sinai.
- That journey, deeply remembered in ancient Israel, became the script and the itinerary that *Jews*, over many generations, have made, always again from Egyptian exploitation to the holy mountain. The Jews make that journey, in liturgical imagination, over and over again, most visibly in the imaginative enterprise of Passover.
- *Christians*, in a derivative way, make that journey alongside Jews, rooted in the same ancient memory. Christians do so in the company of Jews, though of course we Christians are frequently tempted to imagine that the script belongs to us and not to Jews.
- Jews, and along with them Christians, make an offer and issue an invitation to *wider humanity* to join the journey, because that hard trek is required not only by the particular passions of Jewishness or of Christian sensibility. Rather, the journey to the common good is a trek that all serious human beings must make, a growth out beyond private interest and sectarian passion.

I will exposit that journey as it is remembered from ancient Israel. I will treat it as a historical memory; as I do so, I will be aware that in various contexts the memory is a present literary-liturgical construction given voice by Jews, by

Christians, and by others who may be fellow travelers with Jews and Christians. The textual memory to which I appeal has great porous openness to other renderings, as long as those renderings remain attentive to the story line. I articulate that defining journey in three moments.

I

Israel begins its core memory in the grip of Pharaoh's Egypt. Indeed, we may take ancient Pharaoh (as a cipher and metaphor in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament) as the paradigmatic enemy of the common good, an agent of immense power who could not get beyond his acquisitive interest to ponder the common good. Pharaoh is an example and an embodiment of a complex system of monopoly that, along with the wealth that it produces, inflicts anxiety that affects every dimension of the system:

1. Pharaoh's Egypt is the breadbasket of the ancient world. Already in Genesis 12, the very first chapter of Israel in the Old Testament, we learn that Pharaoh had ample food and could supply the entire world:

Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land.

Gen 12:10

It was natural and automatic that the Nile Valley should produce bread. A need for bread drove Abraham to the place of security and sufficiency.

2. There is high irony in the report that Pharaoh, the leader of the superpower, has bad dreams. He might

be competent and in control all day long, but when he is asleep at night and his guard is down and his competence is relaxed, he has nightmares. The one with everything has dreams of insecurity:

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "In my dream I was standing on the banks of the Nile; and seven cows, fat and sleek, came up out of the Nile and fed in the reed grass. Then seven other cows came up after them, poor, very ugly, and thin. Never had I seen such ugly ones in all the land of Egypt. The thin and ugly cows ate up the first seven fat cows, but when they had eaten them no one would have known that they had done so, for they were still as ugly as before. Then I awoke. I fell asleep a second time and I saw in my dream seven ears of grain, full and good, growing on one stalk, and seven ears, withered, thin, and blighted by the east wind, sprouting after them; and the thin ears swallowed up the seven good ears."

Gen 41:17-24

He is desperate to find out the meaning of the dream; but no one in the intelligence community of his empire can decode the secret message.

Finally, as a last resort, he summons an unknown Israelite from prison. According to this ancient narrative, the uncredentialed Israelite can decode what the empire cannot discern. Joseph the interpreter immediately grasps the point. The nightmare is about *scarcity*. The one with everything dreams of *deficiency*. The cows and the shocks of grain anticipate years of famine when no food will be produced.

3. Pharaoh receives the interpretation of his nightmare and sets about to make imperial policy. As readers of the narrative, we are permitted to watch while the *nightmare* is turned into *policy*. Pharaoh asks for a plan of action, and Joseph, modest man that he is, nominates himself as food czar:

Now therefore let Pharaoh select a man who is discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt.

Gen 41:33

Joseph, blessed Israelite that he is, is not only a shrewd dream interpreter; he is, as well, an able administrator who commits himself to Pharaoh's food policy. The royal policy is to accomplish a food monopoly. In that ancient world as in any contemporary world, food is a weapon and a tool of control.

We learn of *policy* rooted in *nightmare* (Gen 47:13–26). The peasants, having no food of their own, come to Joseph, now a high-ranking Egyptian, and pay their money in exchange for food so that the centralized government of Pharaoh achieves even greater wealth (v. 14). After the money is all taken, the peasants come again and ask for food. This time Joseph, on behalf of Pharaoh, takes their cattle, what Karl Marx would have termed their “means of production” (vv. 15–17). In the next year, the third year, the peasants still need food. But they have no money and they have no livestock. In the third year, they gladly surrender their freedom in exchange for food:

Shall we die before your eyes, both we and our land?
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

And the inevitable outcome:

So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh.
All the Egyptians sold their fields, because the fam-
ine was severe upon them; and the land became Pha-
raoh's. As for the people, he made slaves of them
from one end of Egypt to the other.

Gen 47:20–21

Slavery in the Old Testament happens because the
strong ones work a monopoly over the weak ones and even-
tually exercise control over their bodies. Not only that, but
in the end, the peasants, now become slaves, are grateful for
their dependent status:

They said, "You have saved our lives; may it please
my lord, we will be slaves to Pharaoh."

Gen 47:25

This is an ominous tale filled with irony, a part of the bibli-
cal text we do not often enough note. We know about the
exodus deliverance, but we do not take notice that slavery
occurred by the manipulation of the economy in the inter-
est of a concentration of wealth and power for the few at the
expense of the community. In reading the Joseph narrative,
we characteristically focus on the providential texts of Gen-

esis 45:1–15 and 50:20, to the neglect of the down-and-dirty narratives of economic transaction.

With reference to the common good, we may formulate a tentative conclusion about the narrative of Pharaoh: *Those who are living in anxiety and fear, most especially fear of scarcity, have no time or energy for the common good.* Anxiety is no adequate basis for the common good; anxiety will cause the formulation of policy and of exploitative practices that are inimical to the common good, a systemic greediness that precludes the common good. Fear-driven nationalism is a poor beginning point for policy!

II

By the end of the book of Genesis, we have a deteriorated social situation consisting in Pharaoh and the state slaves who submit their bodies to slavery in order to receive food from the state monopoly. All parties in this arrangement are beset by anxiety, the slaves because they are exploited, Pharaoh because he is fearful and on guard. The narrative of the book of Exodus is organized into a great contest that is, politically and theologically, an exhibit of the ongoing contest between the *urge to control* and the *power of emancipation* that in ancient Israel is perennially linked to the God of the exodus.

We are given a picture of the frantic, aggressive policies of the empire that are propelled by anxiety:

1. In Exodus 5, we learn that the imperial system is a system of raw and ruthless exploitation, always pressing cheap labor for more production. Chapter 5 of the book of Exodus is permeated with harsh pharaonic commands to the cheap labor force, unbearable labor conditions, and unrealistic production schedules:

But the king of Egypt said to them, “Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labors!”

Exod 5:4

That same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people, as well as their supervisors, “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.”

Exod 5:6–9

The supervisors simply carry out the demands of the empire:

So the taskmasters and the supervisors of the people went out and said to the people, “Thus says Pharaoh, ‘I will not give you straw. Go and get straw yourselves, wherever you can find it; but your work will not be lessened in the least.’”

Exod 5:10–11

The taskmasters are relentless:

The taskmasters were urgent, saying, “Complete your work, the same daily assignment as when you were given straw.” And the supervisors of the Israel-

ites, whom Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten, and were asked, "Why did you not finish the required quantity of bricks yesterday and today, as you did before?"

Exod 5:13-14

The production schedule, propelled by the king with the bad dreams, assumes that production that will enhance centralized authority is the purpose of all labor.

2. The aggressive policies of Pharaoh have a purpose other than mere exploitation. The narrative shows that Pharaoh is scared to death of his own workforce. He fears their departure, the loss of labor, and the humiliation of the empire. In his fear, Pharaoh becomes even more abrasive:

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

The resounding word *ruthless* bespeaks an exploitative system that no longer thinks well about productivity. The fear that lies behind such policy finally leads to an assault on the labor force that provides for the killing of all baby boys that are potentially part of the workforce:

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 insanity of the policy is that Pharaoh now destroys precisely those who would be the next generation of workers.

3. The move from economic exploitation to policies that are grounded in fear seems deliberately designed to produce suffering. Finally, as every exploitative system eventually learns, the exploitation rooted in fear reaches its limit of unbearable suffering. Two things happen:

First, the unbearable suffering comes to public speech. Totalitarian regimes seek to keep suffering silent and invisible for as long as possible. But finally, as every totalitarian regime eventually learns, human suffering will not stay silent. There is a cry! It is the irreducible human reality of suffering that must have voice. It is only a cry, an articulation of raw bodily dismay. That is as close as we come in this narrative to prayer. Prayer here is truth—the truth of bodily pain—sounding its inchoate demand. The cry is not addressed to anyone. It is simply out there, declaring publicly that the social system of the empire has failed.

But second, as the biblical narrative has it—most remarkably—the cry of abused labor found its way to the ears of YHWH who, in this narrative, is reckoned to be a central player in the public drama of social power. The cry is not addressed to YHWH; but it comes to YHWH because YHWH is a magnet that draws the cries of the abused:²

Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God.
God heard their groaning, and God remembered
his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God

2. See James Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2003), chapter 5, on the linkage between the human cry and the propensity of the God of the Bible.

looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

Exod 2:23b–25

The human cry, so the Bible asserts, evokes divine resolve. There is a divine resolve to transform the economic situation of the slaves. It is, at the same time, inescapably, a divine resolve to delegitimize Pharaoh and to wrest social initiative away from the empire.

4. The practice of exploitation, fear, and suffering produces a decisive moment in human history. This dramatic turn away from aggressive centralized power and a food monopoly features a fresh divine resolve for an alternative possibility, a resolve that in turn features raw human agency. The biblical narrative is very careful and precise about how it transposes *divine resolve* into *human agency*. That transposition is declared in the encounter of the burning bush wherein Moses is addressed and summoned by this self-declaring God. The outcome of that inscrutable mystery of encounter is that Moses is invested with the vision of the slave community in its departure from the imperial economy. The words that go with the encounter are words of *divine resolve*:

Then the LORD said, “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 up 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

But the divine resolve turns abruptly to *human agency* in verse 10:

So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.

The outcome is a human agent who can act and dream outside imperial reality. And dreaming outside imperial reality, that human agent can begin the daring extrication of this people from the imperial system.

There is, surely, some high irony in the juxtaposition of Pharaoh and Moses. Pharaoh is a dreamer, but he dreams only of the nightmare of scarcity. But contrast Moses, who, after the burning bush, can indeed say, “I have a dream.”

I have a dream of departure,
 I have a dream beyond brick quotas,
 I have a dream beyond the regime of exploitation
 and fear,
 I have a dream outside the zone of strategically
 designed suffering.

The dream of Moses sharply contrasts with the nightmare of Pharaoh. It is that dream that propels the biblical narrative. Pharaoh and Moses, along with all of his people, had been contained in a system of anxiety. There was enough anxiety for everyone, but there was not and could not be a common good. The anxiety system of Pharaoh precluded the common good. The imperial arrangement made everyone into a

master or a slave, a threat or an accomplice, a rival or a slave. For the sake of the common good, it was necessary to depart *the anxiety system* that produces *nightmares of scarcity*.

**THE REMAINDER OF THIS CHAPTER IS
NOT INCLUDED IN THIS EXCERPT**