

Delivered into Covenant

Pivotal Moments in the Book of Exodus,
Part Two

Walter Brueggemann

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Series Foreword

Pivots in Scripture

Not long after arriving in Atlanta for my first tenure-track job, still very green in my field and profession, I somehow found the courage to invite Walter Brueggemann, who taught a few miles away at Columbia Theological Seminary, to lecture in my Introduction to Old Testament course. To my great delight he accepted, despite the fact that the class met at eight o'clock in the morning and Atlanta traffic is legendary. (Those who know Walter better than I did at that time know what I discovered only later: that such generosity is standard operating procedure for him.) I either offered, or perhaps he suggested, that the topic of his guest lecture should be Jeremiah. And so it was that a few weeks after the invitation was extended and received, my students and I were treated to eighty minutes of brilliant insight into Jeremiah from one of the masters of that biblical book, not to mention the larger Book to which Jeremiah belongs.¹

Even now, almost twenty years later, I remember a number of things about that lecture—clear testimony to the quality of the content and the one who gave it. In all honesty, I must admit that several of the things I remember have made their way into my own subsequent lectures on Jeremiah. In this way, Walter's presence could still (and still can!) be felt in my later classes, despite the fact that I couldn't ask him to guest lecture every year. One moment from that initial lecture stands out with special clarity: Walter's exposition of a specific text from Jeremiah. I suspect I knew this particular text before, maybe even read about it in something Walter had written, but as I recall things now it was that early morning lecture at Emory

University in 2002 that drilled it into my long-term memory bank. The text in question was Jeremiah 30:12–17:

For thus says the LORD:
Your hurt is incurable,
 your wound is grievous.
There is no one to uphold your cause,
 no medicine for your wound,
 no healing for you.
All your lovers have forgotten you;
 they care nothing for you;
for I have dealt you the blow of an enemy,
 the punishment of a merciless foe,
because your guilt is great,
 because your sins are so numerous.
Why do you cry out over your hurt?
 Your pain is incurable.
Because your guilt is great,
 because your sins are so numerous,
 I have done these things to you.
Therefore all who devour you shall be devoured,
 and all your foes, every one of them, shall go into captivity;
those who plunder you shall be plundered,
 and all who prey on you I will make a prey.
For I will restore health to you,
 and your wounds I will heal,
says the LORD,
because they have called you an outcast:
 “‘It is Zion; no one cares for her!’”

The passage is striking for a number of reasons, but what Walter highlighted was the remarkable shift—or better, *pivot*—that takes place in the space between verses 15 and 16. Prior to this point, God’s speech to Israel emphasizes the incurable nature of its wound: “no healing for you” (v. 13)! Israel’s wound is, on the one hand,

the blow of an *enemy*,
the punishment of a *merciless foe*. (v. 14)

On the other hand, the blow is also and more fundamentally *God’s own doing*:

for *I have dealt* you the blow (v. 14),
I have done these things to you. (v. 15)

Like the original audience, contemporary readers are left no time to ponder this double-agency since immediately after the second ascription of this wound to the Lord's hand, the text pivots both suddenly and drastically. From verse 16 on, we read that those whom the Lord used to punish Israel will now themselves be punished; we also learn that what had before been a terminal illness turns out to be treatable after all (v. 17a). The reason for this dramatic shift is given only in verse 17b: God will cure the incurable wound because God will not stand by while Israel's enemies call it "an outcast," claiming that "no one cares for Zion."

Now in truth, what God says to Israel/Zion in verse 13 sounds very much like "no one cares for you," but as Walter memorably put it in his lecture, while it is one thing to talk about your own mother, it is another thing altogether when someone else talks about your mother! God, it would seem, claims privilege to say certain things about Zion that others are simply not allowed to say. If and when they ever do utter such sentiments, God is mobilized to defend and to heal. Zion, it turns out, is no outcast, after all; there is, after all, One who still cares for her.

The space between verses 15 and 16 is a pivot, explained most fully in verse 17. This, then, is a turning point that changes everything in this passage—a passage that can be seen, more broadly and in turn, as a pivotal moment in the larger book of Jeremiah, coming, as it does, early in a section that shifts decidedly toward consolation and restoration.

And Jeremiah 30:12–17 is not alone in the Old Testament. Another remarkable pivot takes place in the space between the two lines of Psalm 22:21:

Save me from the mouth of the lion!
 From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.

In the first line, there is an urgent plea for immediate help: "Save!"; in the second, testimony to past deliverance: "You *have rescued* me." Something drastic, something pivotal has taken place here, in between

two parallel lines of Hebrew poetry. Before this pivot, the psalmist knew only of *God-forsakenness* (v. 1). But after it, the psalmist is full only of *God-praise* (vv. 22–24) that extends to the most remarkable and unexpected corners of the world and underworld (vv. 25–31).²

Spiritual writer and humanities professor Marilyn Chandler McEntyre has written recently of “pausing where Scripture gives one pause.” She comments on memorable biblical phrases like “teach me your paths,” “hidden with Christ,” and “do not harden your hearts.”³ Phrases like these, she writes,

have lives of their own. Neither sentences nor single words, they are little compositions that suggest and evoke and invite. . . . They are often what we remember: “Fourscore and seven years ago” recalls a whole era, triggers a constellation of feelings, and evokes an image of Lincoln. . . . In the classic film *A Bridge Too Far*, one soldier, rowing for his life away from an impending explosion, repeats again and again a fragment of the only prayer he remembers: “Hail Mary, full of grace . . . Hail Mary, full of grace . . . Hail Mary, full of grace . . .”—and somehow we believe that such a prayer at such a time suffices.⁴

So it is that phrases are “powerful instruments of awakening and recollection for all of us.”⁵ McEntyre goes on to note that the spiritual practice of meditative reading known as *lectio divina* encourages readers to pay attention to specific words or phrases:

Learning to notice what we notice as we move slowly from words to meaning, pausing where we sense a slight beckoning, allowing associations to emerge around the phrase that stopped us is an act of faith that the Spirit will meet us there. There is, we may assume, a gift to be received wherever we are stopped and summoned.⁶

Pivotal moments in the Old Testament like the ones in Jeremiah 30 and Psalm 22 aren’t exactly the same thing as the practice of pausing commended by McEntyre, but the two seem closely related. Pivotal texts are precisely the ones that arrest us, demand our attention, change everything:

- Suddenly, *healing*—Jeremiah 30:16–17
- Suddenly, *deliverance*—Psalm 22:21b

Of course, the pivots found in Scripture are not always so benign. One may think, alternatively, of these:

- Suddenly, *trouble*—as in 2 Samuel 11:5, Bathsheba’s report (only two words in Hebrew) to David: “I’m pregnant.”
- Suddenly, *judgment*—as in 2 Samuel 12:7, Nathan’s statement (also only two words in Hebrew) to David: “You’re that man!”

Now one could, especially in a more skeptical mode, wonder just how many pivotal moments, how many *suddenlys* like these, might actually exist in Scripture. But before we assume that the list is quite finite—more of a curiosity than a persistent call to attention—and take our leave to attend to some piece of distracting drivel on our electronic devices, we should stop and remember the Gospel of Mark, which makes a living on *suddenlys*. Jesus is always doing something or having something done to him *suddenly* or *immediately* (*euthus*), and the same is often true for those gathered around him.⁷

What Mark shows us is that, in the end, *suddenly* can aptly describe an entire Gospel, an entire life lived toward God—indeed, a life lived most perfectly toward God. The same may be true for the gospel of God writ large, across both testaments of the Christian Bible. And so, along with the practice of pausing where Scripture gives us pause (McEntyre), pivoting where Scripture itself pivots does the same: it turns us toward something new, something deeper, something *transformative*. These texts are places where the Bible, and we who read it, may pivot toward another world—another *divine* world—that can change our own for the better, forever. In contrast to McEntyre’s pauses, which anticipate that the Spirit will reach out to us through the text, these pivotal moments in Scripture are not acts of faith but *places* of faith, established sites where the Spirit has *already* met the faithful. They are gifts *already* given, though they seem largely still waiting on us to receive them. The goal of the present volume, and this series dedicated to pivotal moments in the Old Testament, is to mediate those gifts. We are fortunate to have Professor Brueggemann lead the way.

Brent A. Strawn, *Series Editor*

Preface

What follows here is not a commentary on the book of Exodus. We have an ample supply of reliable commentaries including my own.¹ Rather, this is more like a reader's guide to the book of Exodus, suitable for individual or group study and divided into two volumes, of which this is the second.

Readers of the book of Exodus are confronted by the text with two sorts of problems. On the one hand, the book of Exodus is constructed in a quite complex way, as critical study has made clear. The complexity consists first in multiple layers of tradition generated over time, a multiplicity factored out in established critical study as "documents" or "sources." The complexity consists, second, in the problem of the interface of *narrative* that tells of Exodus emancipation, wilderness sojourn, covenant-making, and the episode of the golden calf, and *prescribed commandments* that include both the familiar requirements of Sinai and the very different provisions for the divine presence in the cult. It is not at all obvious how the narrative and the different collections of prescribed commandments fit together or operate in each other's presence. For the most part, commentators have not invested much energy in this problem.

On the other hand, the reader is confronted with a mass of detail, so much so that it is difficult to sort out where the accent should fall in our reading. What I have done in this study is simply to indicate what I think are the pivotal moments through which the detail of the text can be organized and understood in some coherent way. In the end I hope this series of textual expositions amounts to something of a canonical reading of the book, in two parts. The first volume

covered Exodus chapters 1–15, tracing the intervention of YHWH to emancipate the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, through their passage through the Red Sea. This second volume examines the rest of the book of Exodus, from the Israelites' wilderness wanderings to the covenant of Sinai, its attendant commandments, and the prescriptions for and construction of the tabernacle, in which the presence of God was to dwell. The book of Exodus in its entirety is arranged according to distinct themes (for further reading, I have appended the entirety of my essay "The God Who Gives Rest" on the canonical shape and intent of the book):

The exodus deliverance (1–15)

The wilderness sojourn (16–18)

The covenant of Sinai (19–24)

The authorization of the tabernacle (25–31)

The violation of the Sinai covenant (32–34)

The completion of the tabernacle (35–40)²

Throughout, my own bent in interpretation is to attempt to read through a liberationist hermeneutic that I believe is required both by the text and by our own demanding interpretive context. Most often a liberationist reading of the book of Exodus does not extend to the later more didactic and prescriptive materials. I suggest, however, that these later texts attest that it is precisely the God of emancipation who takes up an emancipatory presence in ancient Israel. The "glory" that comes to occupy the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34–38) is the very "glory" that God has gained over Pharaoh (Exodus 14:4, 17). Thus the God who inhabits the tabernacle is the God who has prevailed over slavery and who intends, for all time to come, to oppose and defeat the powers of bondage. The priestly materials, to be sure, tilt toward the domestication of the emancipatory God. In the end, however, that tilt cannot and will not violate the deep resolve of God. Thus later on, in the tabernacle-become-temple, God's massive capacity for sovereignty is on exhibit, so much so that the observers-participants in worship are struck with awe and must exclaim, "Glory!" (Psalm 29:9). This exclaimed glory in the liturgy is again the same glory gained over Pharaoh and situated in the

tabernacle (40:34–38). It is my hope and intent that my exposition will make clear this coherence (albeit voiced in fragmentary ways) that amounts in sum to the book of Exodus.

As always, my debts in the completion of this book are very great. They include on the one hand a great company of teachers and colleagues who have helped to situate me in a liberation trajectory of interpretation. On the other hand, they include, as so often, colleagues at Westminster John Knox Press who patiently and skillfully turn words into books, most especially Julie Mullins, who has helped my work along in vigorous ways. Brent Strawn, in his characteristic way, has done careful, extensive, and generative work to make this into a much better manuscript, and I am grateful to him.

I am glad to dedicate this book to Davis Hankins, one of my foremost students. His scholarship has outrun my competence; I anticipate that he will continue to make important contributions to our common research. Beyond that, Davis has been of great help to me in finishing up some of my work in more recent years. I salute him with pride and affection.

Walter Brueggemann
Amid the global coronavirus pandemic

Chapter 1

Glory Unexpected (Exodus 16:10)

And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud.

Scripture Passages for Reference

Exodus 3:8

Exodus 15

Exodus 16:3, 6–7

Exodus 24:16–17

Exodus 40:34–38

Psalm 104:14–15

They were free at last! They were no longer captive to Pharaoh's brutalizing brick quotas. They had their defiant songs and their emancipated dancing as evidence of their new freedom. YHWH had made a promise to them:

“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.” (Exodus 3:8)

2 Delivered into Covenant

They were on their way to that new land of abundance and well-being. Just as soon as Moses (15:1–18) and Miriam (vv. 20–21) finished their songs, they set out:

Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. (v. 22)

The first ten steps out of Egypt toward the land of promise must have been a shock to the eager Israelites. They did not step into a land of promise as they had anticipated. Rather, they stepped into the wilderness, here called “the wilderness of Shur.” There had been no mention of a wilderness in the promise of YHWH. They had been promised a new, good land, but they found themselves instead in the wilderness. Whereas the new land of promise was to be marked by “milk and honey,” the wilderness turned out to be a place of shortage. Indeed, “wilderness” means, in this usage, a place without viable life supports. The immediate crisis, one day into the wilderness, is “no water” (v. 22). Of course! Water is a nonnegotiable requirement. There had been ample water from the Nile. But the wilderness specializes in its absence. Immediately they complained (v. 24). In three verses their dancing joy has turned to contentious complaint.

The pressing need for water was a problem soon solved by the intervention of Moses and the responsiveness of YHWH (v. 25). So they came to the oasis of Elam, where they found water (v. 27). That crisis is overcome, but the long-term problem of the wilderness will persist. We can only imagine the fearful disappointment of Israel as it faced wilderness instead of the land of promise. The contrast the people voiced, however, was not only the land promise and the wilderness they encountered. They also voiced a contrast between that wilderness and the steady supply of food they remembered that was produced by the Nile River back in Egypt. That contrast was vivid in their imagination. They remembered, perhaps romantically and unrealistically, that steady food supply they had enjoyed:

“If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” (16:3)

In their dire circumstance, they were fixed, in their imagination, on Egypt. We may imagine that they only reluctantly backed into the wilderness, keeping their eyes or at least their imagination focused on Egypt. Their memory was not of their brutal enslavement. It was rather about the wonder of Egypt. They remembered their steady food supply, the unchanging rule of Pharaoh, the fixed reliability of the regime. Perhaps they recalled the wonder of Pharaoh's massive building program, pyramids and all, and the spectacle of royal parades and processions (on which see Genesis 41:42–43). They remembered “the glory of Pharaoh,” the magnificence of his showmanship, all of which was a function of his legitimacy. In this context, “glory” bespeaks the aura of authority and the right to rule. And Pharaoh had such an aura in spades! While the slaves had “groaned and cried out” in their bondage, that is not now what they recalled. What they remembered was how wondrous Egypt was, even if it was built on their aching backs.

Wilderness was such a contrast to Pharaoh's Egypt:

Egypt had glory; wilderness had only deathly thinness.

Egypt had water; wilderness was totally arid.

Egypt had bread; wilderness was a zone of hunger.

Egypt had meat; wilderness offered none.

So they backed away from Egypt, reluctantly, now committed to a journey in which they wanted no part.

But Moses is uncompromising. He exhibits no doubt but has complete confidence in YHWH's promises and YHWH's presence. Moses does not doubt that YHWH's commitment to the wilderness will transform the wilderness. In response to their complaint, Moses offers his lordly assurance:

“In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD.” (16:6–7)

YHWH is identified as the one who delivered Israel from Egypt. And then, in a great emancipatory leap, Moses assures that in the morning

Israel will see the glory of YHWH given as reassuring response. This is an amazing utterance by Moses. It sharply juxtaposes *the glory of YHWH* with the *glory of Pharaoh*. The glory of Pharaoh consists in grandeur and spectacle and exhibit. It amounts to a claim of legitimate rule. By contrast YHWH seems poor indeed—no pyramids, parades, processions, spectacles, or exhibits.

At the outset of the departure from Egypt, however, YHWH had resolved to “gain glory” over Pharaoh (Exodus 14:4, 17). The twice-stated formula is remarkable. In this usage, “glory” means a raw exhibit of power and domination. It is a sociopolitical term bespeaking legitimate authority. Pharaoh has some glory, YHWH concedes. But YHWH will *outglory* Pharaoh, show YHWH’s self to be stronger, more authoritative, and more entitled to governance. And, of course, the exodus narrative traces the process whereby the *glory of Pharaoh* is diminished and shown to be impotent, as the *glory of YHWH* is maximized through the process of emancipation. It is this triumphant glory that the narrative exhibits, the force that culminated in “the dead Egyptians” of 14:30.

Now Moses promises the bereft Israelites in the wilderness that they will see the glory of the Lord exactly in the wilderness where Pharaoh is no longer on exhibit. They will see the immensity of YHWH’s power and capacity to govern. It is as though in that moment of narrative exchange Israel finally turns its eyes, its imagination, and its desire from a backward wistfulness for Egypt. It turns and faces fully into the wilderness, now with backs to Egypt, now fully coming to terms with what is to be its habitat and destiny for time to come.

In that pivotal moment of turning, moreover, they see exactly what Moses anticipated for them:

And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. (16:10)

The sight must have been breathtaking! It was a surprise beyond expectation. They saw the *glory of YHWH* in the *wilderness*. The narrative is characteristically cagey and guarded when it witnesses to “seeing” anything of God. It does not tell us what they saw. We know that divine glory is often exhibited as light. What they saw was

evidence of YHWH's sovereign legitimacy. YHWH was to preside over the wilderness, a zone of existence that completely eluded Pharaoh's control. This glimpse of holy presence and governance was the seal to the exodus narrative. They now no longer owed Pharaoh anything. They were now fully in the arena of YHWH's sovereignty.

The characterization of YHWH's glory that they saw was "in a cloud"—that is, it was not seen fully and directly but was shrouded and protected. "The cloud" here does not refer to a normal atmospheric condition. Rather "the cloud" will become, in subsequent tradition, a technical term to describe the cultic presence of YHWH in a shrine, a divine presence mediated through a priestly apparatus. The prominent presence of Aaron, harbinger of a priestly office, indicates that we now have YHWH given in a sacerdotal way. The narrative already anticipates the way in which YHWH will be present for Israel in the tabernacle and eventually in the temple in Jerusalem.

Thus we are able to see that the appearance of divine glory in the wilderness affirms a convergence of two very different themes. On the one hand, this is an *exhibit of political authority*. This is the one who has defeated Pharaoh and will govern. On the other hand, the one who is politically victorious is now *encapsulated in a "holy order"* as an accessible cultic presence. The two traditions are not easily accommodated to each other. But they are both there. The political agency of YHWH comes, in Israelite tradition, to be a stable, orderly cultic presence, but without surrendering any of the force of agency known in the exodus narrative itself. Thus "glory" becomes a cover term that holds together *forceful agency* and *abiding presence*.

The appearance of this glory, moreover, is in the wilderness. The juxtaposition of *glory* and *wilderness* constitutes a breathtaking oxymoron. In common expectation, divine glory dwells in a carefully designed venue of order and beauty, and never in the raw risk of wilderness. Conversely, wilderness is a place exactly bereft of such divine glory. But now, in a post-pharaonic world, all the old categories and distinctions are upended. YHWH is unlike Pharaoh and the Egyptian gods. YHWH is a God who is willing to submit self to the risks of wilderness. And wilderness in turn is thereby reconstituted as a place of sustenance with visible life support that YHWH gives and guarantees. We are here close to the center of gospel faith: God's life-giving sovereignty is enacted exactly in a venue that seems to

have no life-giving capacity. The evidence of such governance is now not, as with Pharaoh, *horses, chariots, and gold*. Rather, it consists in a supply of *meat, water, and bread*, the most elemental requirements of human life.

In a remarkable, quintessentially Jewish statement, Hans Jonas puts the question of corporeality to European philosophy that has specialized in “awareness of essences” but that never poses questions about food. A phenomenology of the sensation of hunger and satiety must ask

about *why* human beings must eat and about *how much*? Biology, along with physics and chemistry, enlightens us about the *why*, about the inexorable “must.” . . . And in its turn the answer to “how much” leads to such unphilosophical questions as whether there is enough food and how to obtain it, and then raises more questions concerning the just and unjust distribution of property as well as good and bad forms of society.¹

Jonas quotes the possible truth of Bert Brecht’s brash lines written in those same years: “First comes the grub / Then comes morality.”² With its accent on the corporeal, the Jewish tradition finds the most profound theological truth in questions of body and food. This is evident already in the wilderness narrative. Wilderness is the place in which bodies are most at risk. And in that place the “glory of the LORD” must perforce be preoccupied with matters of water, bread, and meat. Thus the psalmist can say about the awesome rule of the creator:

You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to use,
to bring forth food from the earth,
and *wine* to gladden the human heart,
oil to make the face shine,
and *bread* to strengthen the human heart.

Psalm 104:14–15

It is the capacity of the creator God, the one who emancipates, to make of wilderness an arena for a viable life.

In important ways the exodus narrative is a meditation upon and exposition of the glory of God:

- As we have seen, the exodus event is itself a strategy for gaining glory over Pharaoh. In that rendering, the rescue of Israel from bondage is simply a by-product of gaining glory and not a primary intention of YHWH.
- At the conclusion of the Sinai pericope, we are told:

The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. (Exodus 24:16–17)

The references to cloud and fire indicate a cultic arrangement whereby the glory of the Lord is both guaranteed and kept hidden.

- In Exodus 33:18, Moses wants full and direct access to YHWH's glory. That request, translated as "see my face," is denied by YHWH. Such direct access is not bearable. Thus the cultic apparatus that mediates the glory also protects from the direct force of the glory of YHWH.
- In Exodus 40:34–38, the glory that had provisionally settled on the mountain comes finally to rest in a cloud in the tabernacle for which Moses has made careful preparation.

Thus the book of Exodus traces the divine glory from active agency against Pharaoh to an abiding presence in a protected cultic environment. While we habitually read the exodus narrative as a story of emancipation, it can also be taken as a narrative about how YHWH finds a way to be present and authoritative in the life of Israel and in the life of the world. In chapter 16, it is resonance of the glory that makes life sustainable in a venue without any other guarantees.

The theme of *glory in wilderness* echoes in subsequent traditions. In the sixth century, Isaiah imagines that the exile in Babylon will be a means by which YHWH's glory is exhibited—thus a show of authority against the would-be authority of Babylon and its failed gods. There will be a victorious procession of homecoming from

Babylon, for Babylon will not be able to hold captive those whom YHWH wills to come home:

“In the *wilderness* prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the *glory* of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

Isaiah 40:3–5

The return home from wilderness (exile) will be an exhibit of divine glory. The poet attests that divine glory transforms displacement, as “exile” functions as “wilderness” in this poetry.

The emancipation of Israel from Babylonian bondage is an exhibit of divine glory:

I will say to the north, “Give them up,”
and to the south, “Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth—
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for *my glory*,
whom I formed and made.”

43:6–7

The returnees are a signal of the power and authority of YHWH, who is able to give life exactly to those who are in exile and are left without hope.

In the witness of the church, the glory of God is exhibited in the person of Jesus. The Gospel of Luke is framed by a doxology concerning God’s glory. At the birth, the angels sing of God’s glory that is attendant to the birth:

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

Luke 2:14

That song, moreover, is echoed in the triumphal entry of Jesus:

“Blessed is the king
 who comes in the name of the Lord!
 Peace in heaven,
 and glory in the highest heaven!”
 19:38

The Gospel of Luke is most intentional in its inventory of all the “glory figures” of Roman governance (3:1–2). But the narrative works to subvert their posturing claims, because the “glory” evidently rests not with Roman authority but with this one who is visibly without authority. Thus Jesus is regularly found in places and with people who have no claim to glory, where self-regarding glory would never be found (see 5:29–32). But, of course, the narrative is exactly to the point that the glory of God carried by Jesus is found precisely in the “wilderness places” of society.

As the New Testament narrative attests, so New Testament theological reflection makes the same point:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.
 (John 1:14)

And Paul in his lyric testimony can declare that they have “crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians 2:8).

Thus *glory/wilderness*, in the articulation of Jesus, takes the form of *glory/crucifixion*. It is this startling claim—that the at-risk life of Jesus is the full enactment of God’s glory—that stands at the center of Christian confession. In that regard, the Christian confession is completely congruent with the exodus narrative. The peculiar God evidences glory—the legitimacy of governance—exactly in places of jeopardy.

The takeaway from this sequence of witnesses is that we should not be impressed by or enthralled to the prominent modes of glory expressed as wealth, power, knowledge, or control that seduce. The authentic trustworthy aura of legitimacy is found precisely in arenas of vulnerability—among the blind, the deaf, the lepers, the lame, the dead, the poor (Luke 7:22). It is no wonder that Jesus warns against

being “scandalized” (offended) by this relocation of divine glory. The glory of God is situated in the quotidian requirements of water, bread, and meat. Such sustenance is known, in our narrative, to be given exactly in the wilderness. In context, the glory of Pharaoh no longer mesmerizes or seduces. It is no wonder that the paragraph ends with a defining linkage between knowledge of YHWH and the gifts of meat and bread:

““At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.”” (Exodus 16:12)

Questions for Discussion

1. Where do you see “wilderness places” as possible places where God’s glory may be manifested and experienced—in society, the church, or your own life?
2. Why is God’s glory unwieldy, on the one hand, but also managed and ordered, on the other? What do you make of this “both/and” tension?
3. What instance of nondivine glory are you most attracted to and tempted by?
4. Are you scandalized by the relocation of divine glory? Why or why not? How does the physical/corporal nature of this glory and deliverance—especially in the wilderness—contribute to your feeling?

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