Deliver Us

Salvation and the Liberating God of the Bible

Walter Brueggemann

Contents

Series Preface

I have been very pleased that David Dobson and his staff at Westminster John Knox Press have proposed this extended series of republications of my work. Indeed, I know of no old person who is not pleased to be taken seriously in old age! My first thought, in learning of this proposed series, is that my life and my work have been providentially fortunate in having good companions all along the way who have both supported me and for the most part kept me honest in my work. I have been blessed by the best teachers, who have prepared me to think both critically and generatively. I have been fortunate to be accompanied by good colleagues, both academic and pastoral, who have engaged my work. And I have been gifted to have uncommonly able students, some of whom continue to instruct me in the high art of Old Testament study.

The long years of my work that will be represented in this series reflect my slow process of finding my own voice, of sorting out accents and emphases, and of centering my work on recurring themes that I have judged to merit continuing attention. The result of that slow process is that over time my work is marked by repetition and reiteration, as well as contradiction, change of mind, and ambiguity, all of which belongs to seeing my work as an organic whole as I have been given courage and insight. In the end I have settled on recurring themes (reflected in the organization of this series) that I hope I have continued to treat with imagination, so that my return to them is not simply reiteration but is critically generative of new perspective and possibility.

In retrospect, I can identify two learnings from the philosopher and hermeneut Paul Ricoeur that illumine my work. Ricoeur has given me names for what I have been doing, even though I was at work on such matters before I acquired Ricoeur's terminology. First, in his book *Freud and Philosophy* (1965), Ricoeur identifies two moves that are essential for interpretation. On the one hand there is "suspicion." By this term Ricoeur means critical skepticism. In biblical study "suspicion" has taken the form of historical criticism, in which the interpreter doubts the "fictive" location and function of the text and hypothesizes about the "real, historical" location and function of the text. On the other hand, there is "retrieval," by which Ricoeur means the capacity to reclaim what is true in the text after due "suspicion." My own work has included measures of "suspicion," because a grounding in historical criticism has been indispensable for responsible interpretation. My work, however, is very much and increasingly tilted toward "retrieval," the recovery of what is theologically urgent in the text. My own location in a liberal-progressive trajectory of interpretation has led me to an awareness that liberal-progressives are tempted to discard "the baby" along with "the bath." For that reason, my work has been to recover and reclaim, I hope in generative imaginative ways, the claims of biblical faith.

Second and closely related, Ricoeur has often worked with a grid of "precritical/critical/postcritical" interpretation. My own schooling and that of my companions has been in a critical tradition; that enterprise by itself, however, has left the church with little to preach, teach, or trust. For that reason, my work has become increasingly postcritical, that is, with a "second naiveté," a readiness to engage in serious ways the claims of the text. I have done so in a conviction that the alternative metanarratives available to us are inadequate and the core claims of the Bible are more adequate for a life of responsible well-being. Both liberal-progressive Christians and fundamentalist Christians are tempted and seduced by alternative narratives that are elementally inimical to the claims of the Bible; for that reason, the work of a generative exposition of biblical claims seems to me urgent. Thus I anticipate that this series may be a continuing invitation to the ongoing urgent work of exposition that both makes clear the singular claims of the Bible and exposes the inadequacy of competing narratives that, from a biblical perspective, amount to

idolatry. It is my hope that such continuing work will not only give preachers something substantive to preach and give teachers something substantive to teach, but will invite the church to embrace the biblical claims that it can "trust and obey."

My work has been consistently in response to the several unfolding crises facing our society and, more particularly, the crises faced by the church. Strong market forces and ideological passions that occupy center stage among us sore tempt the church to skew its tradition, to compromise its gospel claim, and to want to be "like the nations" (see 1 Sam. 8:5, 20), that is, without the embarrassment of gospel disjunction. Consequently I have concluded, over time, that our interpretive work must be more radical in its awareness that the claims of faith increasingly contradict the dominant ideologies of our time. That increasing awareness of contradiction is ill-served by progressive-liberal accommodation to capitalist interests and, conversely, it is ill-served by the packaged reductions of reactionary conservatism. The work we have now to do is more complex and more demanding than either progressive-liberal or reactionary-conservative offers. Thus our work is to continue to probe this normative tradition that is entrusted to us that is elusive in its articulation and that hosts a Holy Agent who runs beyond our explanatory categories in irascible freedom and in bottomless fidelity.

I am grateful to the folk at Westminster John Knox and to a host of colleagues who continue to engage my work. I am profoundly grateful to Davis Hankins, on the one hand, for his willingness to do the arduous work of editing this series. On the other hand, I am grateful to Davis for being my conversation partner over time in ways that have evoked some of my better work and that have fueled my imagination in fresh directions. I dare anticipate that this coming series of republication will, in generative ways beyond my ken, continue to engage a rising generation of interpreters in bold, courageous, and glad obedience.

Walter Brueggemann

Editor's Introduction

I began theological education just as Walter Brueggemann was scheduled to retire at Columbia Theological Seminary. I knew very little about the academic study of religion, probably even less about the state of biblical scholarship at the turn of the twenty-first century, yet somehow I knew enough to take every possible course with Dr. Brueggemann. After retiring, Walter continued to teach a course periodically and work from his study on campus—and he always insisted that it and any pastor's work space be called a "study" rather than an "office"! But before he retired, during his last and my first year at Columbia, I took six different courses in biblical studies, including three with Walter. In my memory, I spent that academic year much like St. Thecla as she sat in a windowsill and listened to the teachings of the apostle Paul. According to her mother's descriptive flourish, Thecla, "clinging to the window like a spider, lays hold of what is said by him with a strange eagerness and fearful emotion." It was for me as it had been for Thecla.

Longtime readers as well as those encountering Walter's words for the first time will discover in the volumes of the Walter Brueggemann Library the same soaring rhetoric, engaging intelligence, acute social analysis, moral clarity, wit, generosity, and grace that make it so enlightening and enjoyable to learn from and with Walter Brueggemann. The world we inhabit is broken, dominated by the special interests of the wealthy, teeming with misinformation, divided by entrenched social hierarchies, often despairing before looming ecological catastrophe, and callously indifferent, if not aggressively predatory, toward those facing increasing deprivation

and immiseration. In these volumes readers will find Walter at his best, sharply naming these dynamics of brokenness and richly engaging biblical traditions to uncover and chart alternative forms of collective life that promise to be more just, more merciful, and more loving.

Each volume in the Walter Brueggemann Library coheres around a distinct theme that is a prominent concern across Walter's many publications. The contents of the volumes consist of materials taken from a variety of his previously published works. In other words, I have compiled whole chapters or articles, sections, snippets, and at times even just a line or two from Walter's publications, and sought to weave them together to create a new book that coheres around a specific theme, in this case the theme of salvation in the biblical traditions. Readers who are familiar with Walter's work will not be surprised that this initial volume centers on his expositions on the event of the exodus as definitive and paradigmatic for the Bible's understanding of salvation. Such experienced readers may also discover that this thematic focus somewhat curtails what Brent Strawn aptly describes as Walter's "canonical dexterity," that is, his unrivaled ability to range freely and broadly across the various genres and sections of the Bible, Old and New Testament alike. My hope is that the gains from this thematic cohesion at least somewhat make up for whatever is lost in canonical dexterity.

The word "salvation" is relatively rare in Brueggemann's publications. He much prefers to speak of liberation, emancipation, restoration, transformation, reconciliation, and the like. This may be a consequence of the baggage carried by the notion of "salvation" or "being saved" in some contemporary streams of Christianity, especially in the United States. But regardless, whenever such salvific ideas appear in Brueggemann's work, he often attends to the broader, more encompassing categories of both gift and task that were so important in the Protestant Reformation and remain so in Jewish and Christian theology more broadly.[1] Brueggemann similarly demonstrates and emphasizes that any conception of salvation rooted in biblical traditions ought to link gift and task. The biblical God characteristically saves people not only *from* certain conditions, but also *for* a full restoration of their well-being.

In these chapters Brueggemann consistently returns to the basic elements within the book of Exodus, namely, the story of liberation followed by the guidance, stipulations, and laws adopted by the newly liberated community, first in Egypt, then in the wilderness, but especially at Mount Sinai. Thus, while the biblical story of the exodus is a particular narrative, specific to the circumstance of the Hebrew people in Egypt, it becomes paradigmatic in the Bible for the gifts and tasks that constitute a range of experiences of salvation. Whether the people of God find themselves in Egypt, in exile, or in contemporary settings of neoliberal capitalism, the exodus offers an archetype through which humans can better grasp the constraining forces of anxiety, injustice, and exploitation that pose perpetual threats to the flourishing of life, and imagine and be energized for new and liberating modes of social organization. The ancient story, Brueggemann wagers, has the capacity to overcome the fear, despair, and denial of the reigning dystopian order that views resources as scarce and all in cutthroat competition for them. Liberation frees the community to assume the tasks of a more just and more merciful social order, and respond with joyful gratitude for its newly emancipated future.

In organizing this volume, I have aimed to create some narrative cohesion across four parts. Part 1 focuses on the emancipatory event of the exodus and the circumstances of anxiety, overproduction, exploitation, and violent oppression in Egypt from which the Israelites are liberated. Part 2 turns to the tasks announced in the commandments of the Decalogue, which summon the Israelites, on the basis of their new faith in the exodus-causing and Sabbath-observing God, to commit their social order to neighborly engagement for the sake of the common good. The three chapters in part 3 center on other legal materials in the Torah that develop the baseline obligations in the Decalogue so that the entirety of Israel's social life would be centered on the creator God who saved them in the exodus event. Part 4 explores how this covenantal paradigm for salvation gets inflected in various biblical texts, especially in narrative and prophetic traditions, and also in the words and life of Jesus. Finally, a brief conclusion continues a thread running throughout the book: Brueggemann's ceaseless effort to emphasize the significance of

the biblical paradigm of salvation for contemporary communities of faith, particularly in the context of the church in the United States.

Finally, I would like to express my immense gratitude. First to Walter, for trusting me with this project as with so much, and most especially for the boundless care he has shown me and my family for many years. Also, to the good folks at Westminster John Knox, for conceiving the idea of this series, for their editorial guidance, and their patience through a series of events that caused several delays, including a global pandemic. Finally, I would like to thank my department chair, Kevin Schilbrack, and Dean Neva Specht, for their consistent support and encouragement on this and many other projects.

Davis Hankins
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Part One

The Liberating Event

Chapter 1

Exodus from Egypt

Emancipation from Anxiety and Exploitation

When we come to the question of salvation in the Bible, the exodus story is unquestionably the indispensable starting point. The exodus narrative provides Israel with a clear paradigm for, first, identifying communal and individual crises, and second, imagining emancipation into an alternative, sustainable way of life. The great crisis for ancient Israel was, as it is for us, a crisis of "the common good," the sense of communal solidarity that binds all in a common destiny—haves and have-nots, rich and poor, Hebrews and Egyptians, Blacks and whites. 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 interests, transcends sectarian commitments, and offers human solidarity.

I

Ancient Israel faces its crisis in the grip of Pharaoh's Egypt. In the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, ancient Pharaoh is a cipher and metaphor that symbolizes 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. He embodies and represents raw, absolute, worldly power. He is, like Pilate after him, a stand-in for the whole of empire. Pharaoh is an example and an embodiment of a complex system of monopoly that, along with the

wealth that it manages, produces anxiety that affects every dimension of the system.

First, regarding the wealth that Pharaoh manages, Egypt was of course 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. (v. 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.

Second, regarding the anxiety produced by Pharaoh's "empire of force,"[1] 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.

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. (v. 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 called 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. (v. 19)

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." And the inevitable outcome:

> 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. (vv. 20–21)

Slavery in the Old Testament happens because the strong ones work a monopoly over the weak ones, and eventually exercise control over their bodies. Not only that; 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." (v. 25)

This is an ominous tale filled with irony, a part of the biblical 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 interest of a concentration of wealth and power for the few at the community's expense. In reading the Joseph narrative we characteristically focus on the providential texts of Genesis 45:1–15 and 50:20, to the neglect of the down-and-dirty narratives of economic transaction.

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, which he uses as a weapon against his own people. 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 the surplus of the empire. It is astonishing that critical scholarship has asked forever about the identification of these storehouse cities, but without ever asking about the skewed exploitative social relationships between owner and laborers

that the project exhibits. The storehouse 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.

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 exploitative practices that are inimical to the common good, a systemic greediness that precludes the common good.

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.

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

1. First, we learn that the imperial system is a system of raw, ruthless exploitation, always pressing cheap labor for more production

and permitting no slippage or accommodation. Exodus 5 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." (vv. 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.'" (vv. 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 Israelites, 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?" (vv. 13–14)

Despite the beatings, the Israelite supervisors of labor who have been co-opted and coerced by Pharaoh to make the system work issue a protest to the crown:

> Then the Israelite supervisors came to Pharaoh and cried, "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." (vv. 15–16)

But Pharaoh, the voice of the imperial production system, is relentless:

> He said, "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. 17–18)

And the supervisors were quick to issue the new ferocious demands to the slave community:

> The Israelite supervisors saw that they were in trouble when they were told, "You shall not lessen your daily number of bricks." (v. 19)

Israel's memory of Egypt's imperial economy is of an irrepressible brick quota and an impossible production schedule. And like any driven production system, the quotas keep increasing. Every success generated more rigorous demands. You may be sure that there was no work stoppage under Pharaoh, because the production apparatus was at work 24/7. 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, resolving 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)

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. (v. 16)

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

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. And in this narrative, the silent slaves did not find their voice until Pharaoh died, the one who had been ruthless toward them. But of course, after Pharaoh dies, 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. As every totalitarian regime eventually learns, human suffering will not stay silent. There is a cry! The irreducible human reality of suffering must finally 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 finds 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 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 delegitimate Pharaoh and to wrest social initiative away from the empire. YHWH makes no appearance in the early chapters of Exodus until it is time to respond to the cry of the slaves. It is the voice of the slaves, newly sounded, that draws YHWH actively into the narrative.

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:

> So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt. (v. 10)

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. Moses' childhood is unreported after his terror-laden birth story. 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 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.

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*.

III

The next chapter will explore in some detail the events through which Israel achieves this emancipatory departure, but the ultimate outcome of this paradigmatic performance of biblical salvation is that the formerly silent slaves 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). In Exodus 14 the slaves watched the waters open for them (Exod. 14:21–23). They went through the deep waters of risk where Pharaoh and his enforcers could not follow. In Exodus 15 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" (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" (v. 21).

Thus the slaves departed the anxiety system. And by Exodus 16, they are underway on the long trek to well-being. In chapter 16 they take their first generative steps out into the wilderness—the wilderness is where one ends up if one departs the anxiety system of Pharaoh. 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.

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.

Questions for Reflection

1. Brueggemann describes "the common good" as humanity's common destiny. This common destiny is disrupted by the "pharaohs" of our world, looking to hoard, create anxious systems, and center power. How would you describe, in contrast, "the common good"? Who are the pharaohs of our time disrupting our collective human destiny?
2. Pharaohs have motives, fears, anxieties. Their anxious dreams reflect vulnerable spaces that express the very things that could bring their demise. Think about the pharaohs of our time. What are their fears? How are they creating systems of anxiety and scarcity? Name some of the policies created through these nightmares.
3. As nightmarish policies become realistic and consequential, the people whose lives are burdened and whose bodies are marred cannot take it anymore. Their cries grow louder and louder. Where do you hear these cries? Who is shouting and crying out in your own community?
4. These cries are foundationally and fervently heard by the ever-present God who sides with the ones who are chained by oppression. And it is that God who calls to us through those burning-bush moments, inviting us to be human agents of a new reality. How are you dreaming of a new reality outside imperial reality? In what ways are you freeing yourself from systems of exploitation, productivity, and constant consumption?

Chapter 2

Plagues and Manna

Salvation through Divine Power and Abundant Generosity

*T*he narrative of Israel's departure from the anxiety system of Pharaoh's Egypt is dramatic because it is fraught with contestations. Israel's geographic departure from Egyptian territory is resisted by royal powers that are reluctant to relinquish their labor supply or even to recognize an alternative ordering of social life. Yet this departure is also internally contested as Israel, following their physical exit from Egyptian territory, remains psychologically tempted to return to Egypt in the face of the risky abyss of emancipated life in the wilderness. Although the narrative foreshadows this second, existential obstacle to Israel's departure (e.g., in Exod. 6:9), the first and formidable obstacle to their departure and thus emancipation is Pharaoh's power, which is contested through the extended drama of the plagues (Exod. 7–11). The plagues are acts of disruptive, transformative power on the part of YHWH that serve to overwhelm the power and authority of Pharaoh and, consequently, to rescue the slaves from the power and authority of Pharaoh. The plagues are occasions of immense, inscrutable power that are taken to be signs of YHWH's sovereignty, not at all to be explained naturalistically, as has been frequently attempted. They are not to be understood naturalistically because they make immediate and direct appeal to the hidden, odd power of YHWH, without which they have no force in the narrative. They are exhibits of awesome divine power and resolve before which the anxious power of Pharaoh proves helpless.

I

The immediate effect of the plagues is in order that "the Egyptians may know that I am YHWH" (7:5, auth. trans.). The verb "know" is used in a double sense of (a) having convincing data, but also (b) acknowledging as sovereign. The slow sequence of plagues evidences that Pharaoh, little by little, began to acknowledge and concede, in grudging ways, the rule of YHWH, so that Pharaoh must eventually confess his sin and ask forgiveness (10:16–17). In the end, Pharaoh even acknowledges that the power to bless resides among the Israelites (12:32). The consequence of such a show of power is that Israel also may "know that I am YHWH," that is, recognize YHWH's real sovereignty over Pharaoh's pseudo-sovereignty, and so receive the gift of freedom given by YHWH (10:1–2). Thus the plague narrative constitutes disclosure (both to Egypt the oppressor and to the oppressed slaves) of the way YHWH presides over power relations in history. YHWH's governance is to the astonishing benefit of the slaves. The narrative account has no reservation in exhibiting YHWH's capacity to manage the wonders of creation in order to evoke historical newness (Israel) as an outcome of disordering and reordering creation.[1]

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 Moses refuses that grudging offer, Pharaoh grants a permit to go into the wilderness, but "do not go very far away" (v. 28). And then, Pharaoh petitions Moses,

"Pray for me" (v. 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. (v. 24)

Moses again refuses: "Not a hoof shall 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.

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."[2] 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!" (v. 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.[3]

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, in order, they say, to keep the story going episode after episode:

> 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.

II

After departing the anxiety system of Pharaoh's Egypt, the slaves enter a very different sort of narrative in the wilderness, where it becomes clear that biblical salvation involves more than physical departure. Such departure is essential, difficult, and risky, but it does not realize true emancipation for the characters in the biblical drama. The wilderness is a place where numerous inexplicable and unreal miracles occur, but the biblical story is deeply realistic in its refusal to portray salvation as an easy, miraculous event that immediately embraces those who leave Egypt behind. The wilderness provides a training ground for Israel to begin to inhabit an alternative, emancipated, and flourishing communal life.

Yet Egypt proves difficult for them to leave behind, even as the narrative continues to develop toward the realization of their salvation through a series of events culminating in the new instructions that they receive at Sinai for a covenantal shaping of their lives. By verse 3 of Exodus 16, deep in the wilderness, they began to complain about their new environment of risky faith; they yearned to resubmit to the anxious exploitation of Pharaoh:

> The Israelites said to them, "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." (Exod. 16:3)

They remembered slavery as a place of guaranteed food. Later they would recall their slave diet with some relish:

> The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." (Num. 11:4–6)

Their endless complaint mobilized Moses, who in turn complained to God, and God responded to the complaint; perhaps the divine response was a necessity because now YHWH, and not Pharaoh, is responsible for this people. YHWH issues an assurance:

> I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, "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." (Exod. 16:12)

The meat will be quail and that came as promised. And concerning bread in the morning the narrative reports:

> When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. (v. 14)

The "bread of heaven" was like nothing they knew, and so they said to one another, as they watched the gift of bread fall on them, "What is it?" The Hebrew for that question is *man hu'*, and so the bread is

called "manna." The bread is named "What is it?" which makes it a "wonder bread" that fit none of their prevailing categories; they wondered what it was.

Now it takes little imagination to see that this narrative of bread in the wilderness is a very different sort of narrative contrasted with that of the exodus. The exodus narrative is credible and realistic, all about exploited cheap labor and escape from an impossible production schedule. Compared with that, this narrative of bread from heaven is a dreamy narrative that lacks that kind of realism. But then, consider that there is something inescapably dreamy and unreal about inexplicable generosity. When we hear of it we wonder about it and doubt it, because it does not fit our expectations for a quid pro quo world. Indeed, about such divine generosity there is something so dreamy that we reserve for it the special term *miracle*, something outside the ordinary, something that breaks the pattern of the regular and the expected, something that violates the predictable. So consider this sequence of great words, "dreamy, inexplicable, generous, miracle."

Finally we will come to the word *grace*, a reach of divine generosity not based on the recipient but on the giver. If we juxtapose the words *grace* and *wilderness*, we come to the claim of this narrative of wonder bread. "Wilderness" is a place, in biblical rhetoric, where there are no viable life-support systems. "Grace" is the occupying generosity of God that redefines the place. The wonder bread, as a gesture of divine grace, recharacterizes the wilderness that Israel now discovered to be a place of viable life, made viable by the generous inclination of YHWH.

If we pursue this juxtaposition of "grace" and "wilderness," later we will find it explicit in the poetry of the prophet Jeremiah. That prophet uses the word *wilderness* to refer to the sixth-century exile, a subsequent locus for the life of Israel that also lacked viable life supports. In that locus of death, Israel found sustaining divine presence, so that the prophet can say of God's miracle:

> Thus says the LORD:
> The people who survived the sword
> found *grace* in the *wilderness*;
> when Israel sought for rest,
> the LORD appeared to him from far away.
> Jer. 31:2–3a

It is impossible to overstate the significance of "grace in the wilderness," given in the palpable form of bread that could sustain in an unsustainable context. That moment of wonder, awe, and generosity, in an instant, radically redefined the place in which Israel now had to live in its new freedom, outside the zone of imperial anxiety.

So, the narrative tells us, the bread in the wilderness was a divine gesture of enormous abundance:

> Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat. This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.'" The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. (Exod. 16:15–18)

This narrative stands at the center of Israel's imagination; it embodies and signifies YHWH's *capacity for generosity* that stands in complete contrast to the *nightmare of scarcity* that fueled Pharaoh's rapacious policies. The Israelites were so inured to the scarcity system of Pharaoh that they could hardly take in the alternative abundance given in divine generosity, the purpose of which was to break the vicious cycle of anxiety about scarcity that in turn produced anger, fear, aggression, and, finally, predatory violence.

The Israelites, in the narrative, are overwhelmed by divine abundance. They react, however, as though they were still in the old system of pharaonic scarcity. Moses warned them not to save up or to hoard the bread or to keep extra supplies on hand:

> And Moses said to them, "Let no one leave any of it over until morning." (v. 19)

Take what you need, eat and enjoy! But they did not listen. They filled their pockets and their baskets with extras because there might not be any more tomorrow. That is what one does in the face of scarcity. (In Atlanta, where we never have snow, a rumor of a snowflake will cause grocery shelves to rapidly become empty, storing up for another day when things might be scarce.)

But such frantic surpluses will not work. Because the "bread of heaven" is not like the "bread of affliction" that the Israelites had eaten in Egyptian slavery. There you could save a crust of bread for the next day. But not here! Abundance is not for hoarding. So, we are told:

> They did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it *bred worms* and *became foul*. And Moses was angry with them. Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it *melted*. (vv. 20–21)

The stored-up bread *bred worms*. It *smelled bad*. It *melted*. It would not last. Wonder bread lacks preservatives, because it is given daily, enough but not more, enough so that none need hunger. The bread of heaven is a contradiction to the rat race of production; the creator God who presides over the bread supply breaks the grip of Pharaoh's food monopoly; food is freely given outside the economic system that functions like an Egyptian pyramid with only a few on top of the heap.[4]

III

It is for good reason that in the Bible "bread" is the recurring sign of divine generosity, because it is the concrete indispensable resource for life in the world. In the narrative of the prophet Elisha, among the wonder men in ancient Israel, the narratives are often about bread:

- In 2 Kings 4:1–7 there is the abundant gift of oil given by the prophet so the widow can pay her debts and prepare bread for the future.
- In 2 Kings 4:42–44 the same prophet has a limited supply of bread. But he feeds one hundred people and "has some left." The narrative attests that where the carriers of God's truth are at work, abundance overrides the scarcity of hunger.
- In 2 Kings 6:22–23, in the midst of Israel's perpetual war with Syria, the same prophet intervenes. The king of Israel wants to kill his Syrian prisoners of war, but the prophet will not permit it. Instead of death to the enemies, the prophet commands:

  > Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink; and let them go to their master. (v. 22)

And the outcome of the generous meal:

> So he prepared for them a great feast; after they ate and drank, he sent them on their way, and they went to their master. And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel. (v. 23)

A "great feast" breaks the pattern of violence that is rooted in a fear of scarcity. The narrative attests that the world is not as we had imagined it, not as Pharaoh had organized it. Adherence to patterns of scarcity produces a world in which the generosity of God is nullified. The narratives attest otherwise and invite the listening community into an alternative mode of existence, one that is ordered according to divine generosity.

It is not different later in the poetry of Isaiah. In Isaiah 55 it is clear that the displaced Jews had fallen into the trap of the imperial system of Babylon. They had been carried away into the empire. For Jews with a long memory, being carried to Babylon was like being taken back to Pharaoh's Egypt, because all empires act the same way. All empires act according to the principle of scarcity, imagining that they need more land, more tax money, more revenue, more oil, more cheap labor, more energy. Some Jews had signed on for the new scarcity system that was just like the old scarcity system, once again inured to imperial expectation that left them frazzled, exhausted, and cynical, because empires set quotas that can never be met.

In the midst of that new, unbearable context of scarcity, a context shaped not by facts on the ground but by ideological force, the prophet interrupts with an assertion and a question that raises hard issues about imperial ideology:

> Ho, everyone who thirsts,
> come to the waters;
> and you that have no money,
> come, buy and eat!
> Come, buy wine and milk
> without money and without price.
> Isa. 55:1

Free food, free water, free milk, free wine—more than enough. The old divine gift of abundance in the wilderness is now renewed as abundance in exile. Then the question, which in fact is an accusation:

> Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
> and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
> Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
> and delight yourselves in rich food.
>
> v. 2

The question is to Israelites, people of faith, who have succumbed to the scarcity system of Babylon, who have joined the rat race, and who have imagined that they could get ahead if they hustled more. The poet asks why they do that: "Why do you sign on for scarcity when you know the truth of God's abundance?"

Then comes a summons that follows from the *assurance of generosity* and the *question about the present scarcity*:

> Seek the LORD while he may be found,
> call upon him while he is near;
> let the wicked forsake their way,
> and the unrighteous their thoughts;
> let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them,
> and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
>
> vv. 6–7

In specific location, this text is not a generic concern for sin and salvation. It is, rather, a summons away from the *scarcity system* to the *truth of generosity*. In location the text is a summons to be a Jew with memories of abundance and a call to disengage from the ideology of scarcity that propels the empire. The poet knows that unless this summons is heeded, his listeners will remain perpetually unsatisfied, because the imperial pursuit of "more" can never be satisfied. Pharaoh can never have enough to sleep well at night. Pharaoh's ideology of anxiety will impinge upon sleep even as it defines the economy. Both sleep and the economy remain restless!

What Israel discovered in the wilderness—and again in the exile—is that there is an alternative. Indeed, it is fair to say that the long history of Israel is a contestation between *Pharaoh's system of paucity* and *God's offer of abundance*. Surely it is a legitimate extrapolation that the long history of the church is a contest between *paucity* that presses to control and *abundance* that evokes patterns of generosity. Beyond Israel or church, going all the way back to Erik Erikson's elemental "basic trust," the human enterprise is a contrast

between scarcity and the dreaminess of abundance that breaks the compulsions of scarcity.[5] Israel, full of wonder bread, makes its way to Mount Sinai. That gift of wonder *bread* as a miracle of *abundance* is a show of *generosity* that breaks the deathly pattern of anxiety, fear, greed, and anger, a *miracle* that always surprises because it is beyond our categories of expectation. It is precisely an overwhelming, inexplicable act of generosity that breaks the grip of self-destructive anxiety concerning scarcity.

IV

So they came to Sinai. They came from the *nightmare of paucity* by way of the *miracle of abundance*. What they discovered, as they approached the dread mountain of covenant, is that the gift of shalom had freed them from pharaonic scarcity so that they could have energy for the common good. They discovered at Mount Sinai that they could give energy to the neighborhood because the grip of *scarcity* had been broken by God's *abundance*. As they approached the mountain, long before they had heard any of God's commandments, they asserted, already in Exodus 19:8,

> The people all answered as one: "Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do."

Israel signed on for a new obedience even before they had heard any of the commandments! The reason they did so is that they knew that any new commands from the God of abundance would be better than the commands of Pharaoh. The new commands at Sinai voiced YHWH's dream of a neighborhood, YHWH's intention for the common good. There was no common good in Egypt, because people in a scarcity system cannot entertain the common good.

This narrative from *anxiety* through *abundance* to *neighborhood* invites us to rethink the intention of the Ten Commandments, to which we will turn our attention in the next section. They are not rules for deep moralism. They are not commonsense rules designed to clobber and scold people. Rather, they are the most elemental statement of how to organize social power and social goods for the common

benefit of the community. They are indeed "a new commandment" that is quite in contrast to the old commandments of Pharaoh.

Questions for Reflection

1. Central to the exodus story are the plagues, which display the divine power of YHWH and pressure Pharaoh into concession. In our current world, have you experienced this type of divine power, which disorders in order to reorder creation? Recount a moment in your life when you have been confronted with disorder and chaos. How did this "plague" reorient you, and how did it change your view of power?
2. As Pharaoh comes to the realization that the power of YHWH would overcome the power of imperial rule, YHWH weaves into the tapestry of faith the importance of teaching the next generations of Israelites this new narrative about power. What are you teaching the next generations about the power of God versus the power of empire? How are you helping to pass down the dream of abundance and abolish the nightmare of scarcity?
3. The wilderness is a literal and metaphorical setting in which the Israelites wonder, complain, and yearn for the imperial system of Egypt they are already familiar with. And yet, the wilderness also becomes a place where grace permeates lifelessness and creates life. Reflect on a time in your life when you were in a space of "wilderness." Where did you experience divine grace? At what moment did you receive manna or "the wonder bread"?
4. The manna from YHWH is a gift given out of abundance, the generous energy that breaks the cycles of cultures of scarcity. As you continue to creatively engage the reality of this abundance, how do you imagine growing communities that are rooted in following a God of miracles beyond our expectation? What does that look like for you?

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