

The Practice of Homefulness

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It is my conviction that learning to reread the Bible is not only enormously interesting, but enormously urgent, for in rereading the Bible, we will be permitted to reread our social reality. This double rereading is important, I believe, because what we need in relation to this problem of homelessness is not information, but courage, energy, will, freedom, and impetus. And those permits will come, not from socioeconomic, political analysis, important as such analysis is, but from our deepest texts where we hear a voice of holiness that can intrude upon our settled sense of self and our settled social reality.

The preacher has an important opportunity to connect the problem of *homelessness* (which is much on our minds) with texts on *homefulness* as willed by *God*. Preaching is so urgent because the homelessness generated by our economy can be resituated in a context of evangelical homefulness. I will consider a series of texts and then draw some conclusions. I have as a very modest goal that we together might see one or two texts differently, and thereby see one piece of our crisis differently.

I

My first text, on which I will dwell at some length, is a throwaway line in Hos. 14:1-3. Verses 1-3 are a final invitation in the book of Hosea to repent:

Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God,
for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.
Take words with you and return to the Lord;
say to him, "Take away all guilt;
Accept that which is good, and we will offer
the fruit of our lips.
Assyria will not save us; we will not ride upon horses;
we will say no more, Our God, to the work of our hands.
In you the orphan finds mercy."

"Return to the Lord." That's the first line, reiterated in the second verse. The following verses answer the question, return from what?:

return from iniquity, for you have stumbled into *false faith*;
return from wrong speech, where you have embraced *self-deceptive*
ideology,
return from horses and Assyrians, *mistaken security* in arms,
return from the work of our hands, *self-sufficiency*.

That is a lot to give up: false faith, false ideology, mistaken security, self-sufficiency.

As is usual in Hebrew poetry, the last line circles back on the first line. Notice, nothing yet has been said to characterize Yahweh, the one to whom return is to be made. What would it mean to return to Yahweh? Then comes the punch line, the most important line:

In you, the orphan finds mercy!

What a line! Critical scholarship says it is a late gloss in the poem.¹ But there it is. The statement has three phrases. *In you*, in the God of Israel, the liberator of slaves, the giver of commandments, the patron of covenant, the provider of land. “In you” recalls and makes present the entire long history of Yahweh, the history of the only God who cares about land, food, clothing, houses, material well-being.

The second phrase is *the orphan*. Remember, this text comes out of a tribal society with large, extended families with inheritance, genealogy, pedigree, and patrimony. It is a society in which everyone has a place and belongs, and is known there and named and cared for...unless your daddy has died. The problem about being an orphan is not that you grieve over your dead daddy. It is rather that you lose your place. If your daddy died, you do not belong, you are without name, genealogy, pedigree, patrimony, defense, rescue, advocate, avenger. You are always, everywhere at risk and in jeopardy. That is how the world was ordered in the olden days. And if we reflect long, we see that the realities of social power have not changed much. It is a high risk deal to have lost your place in the tribal world.

Thus in the first two phrases of this poetic line, we have an odd juxtaposition. *There is Yahweh* who has this long, faithful history of intervention and provision, and *there is the orphan*, who has no name, no history, no prospect, no chance in the world. Yahweh is the guarantor, the orphan is the one who has no guarantees.

Everything hinges on the third term of the poetic line, *find mercy*. It is in mercy that the *guarantor* and the one *without guarantees* get together. The two are linked in mercy, the mercy that comes from Yahweh and goes to the orphan. The term “mercy” denotes womb-like mother love, massive attentiveness and solidarity, fidelity that cuts underneath merit to give guarantees.² This is the one who gives guarantees for life to the one who has no guarantees for life. Thus, the entire rhetorical unit says, a) leave off false faith, false ideology, mistaken security, and self-sufficiency; b) get back in obedience to the one who gives guarantees to those who lack every guarantee. I suspect that this text will do for us both because of its powerful witness to God, and because it is precisely such foundational repentance that is required, if we are to have any serious housing revolution.

This marvelous text, however, is open to an insidious and mistaken reading. I take “mercy to the orphan” to be a fairly precise equivalent to “homes for the homeless,” because the homeless are the genuine orphans in our society, for they have no protective tribe. In such a context, “mercy” translates into “a house” which bespeaks membership in a protective community.

The danger for interpretation is that mercy for the orphan, homes for the homeless, comes from Yahweh. It is entirely possible, even if dead wrong, to take the text as an invitation to quiescence and abdication, to conclude that God gives mercy to orphans, and if God gives homes to the homeless, then homelessness is settled, overcome, and not our problem. And of course with a bad theology of otherworldliness, the church has often invited such a reading. When the Bible is read so transcendently, then the human dimension of the housing crisis is cut off from our theological confession, and only knee jerk liberals sign on, and often they are without energy or durability.

It is for that reason that we must work at serious rereading of the Bible away from our transcendental naivete. I suggest that while *mercy* and *orphan* are clear enough in their meanings, what we have to work on for this verse is “in you,” “*in Yahweh*,”

the one to whom we are summoned to return. A number of scholars, especially Norman Gottwald, but also Robert Coote, Marvin Chaney, and Frank Frick have derived from the character of Yahweh a central insight of serious social criticism.³ That key insight is that in terms of cultural linguistics, “God talk” is never transcendental, spiritual, and otherworldly, but it always carries within it, willy-nilly, an implicit and tacit theory of social relations. That is, “God talk” is inherently laden with socioeconomic, political implications. This is, so I argue thus far, simply a formal claim of all religious talk.

When we push beyond formal to substantive matters about the Bible, however, we are not interested in a theoretical notion of “God talk,” but now focus more precisely of “Yahweh talk.” Thus when Hosea says “Return to Yahweh your God” and concludes by saying “in you,” what is being said? The answer I propose is that in Mosaic-prophetic faith it belongs undeniably to the very character of Yahweh—of Yahwism—to foster, advocate, and enact a certain social practice. That is, Yahweh is not a God safely in heaven or in church, but Yahweh is in fact a *specific social practice* which is taken seriously in obedient Israel. When one “returns to Yahweh,” one must return to the social practice in which Yahweh, Yahweh’s people, Yahweh’s community, and Yahweh’s covenant are definitionally involved.

To this I add a supporting text from Jeremiah who learned so much from Hosea. Speaking of good kings and bad kings, and offering King Josiah as a model for a good king, the poet asserts:

He judged the cause of the poor and needy;
then it was well.
Is not this to know me? says the Lord (Jer. 22:16).

This is an extraordinary text which shows how Yahweh is understood in terms of social practice.⁴ Note well, the text does not say that if one takes care of the poor and the needy, then that one will get to know Yahweh. Nor does the text say, that if one knows Yahweh, then one will take care of the poor and needy. The two elements are not sequential nor are they related as cause and effect. Rather the two phrases are synonymous. *Caring for the poor and needy* is equivalent to *knowing Yahweh*. That is who Yahweh is and how Yahweh is known. Yahweh is indeed a mode of social practice and a way of social relation.

Thus Jer. 22:16 illuminates Hos. 14:1-3. “Return to Yahweh” means to return to the God who is present in social practice that is a sharp contrast to false faith, false ideology, mistaken security, and self-sufficiency. The housing crisis among the orphans will not be solved by turning things over to a holy God in heaven, nor by heroic action on our part, but by increasing investment in the social practice wherein Yahweh is present, a social practice which in every generation and every circumstance involves liberation and covenant, gifts and land. Notice that this social practice wherein Yahweh is known and visible characteristically and inevitably clashes with the *status quo* and evokes big time displacement of present power, money, and housing arrangements. Thus the housing problem, when construed evangelically, that is, according to the gospel, is an evangelical task, inviting more folks into the story and social practice defined by the character of this God. It is no stretch of rhetoric to conclude that such a “return to Yahweh” brings together our baptism, that is, embrace of the gospel, and the concrete practice of Yahweh in giving guarantees to orphans. The prophetic alternative is always aimed against a split

between the transcendence of God and the social practice of God, that is, between word and flesh.

II

Now with this framing program, “In thee, the orphan finds mercy,” I thought it would be most useful to lay out a taxonomy of Yahweh’s story of housing. This consists, as I understand the assignment, of calling attention to some crucial texts and suggesting how they may be linked together in a coherent and authorizing sequence. I shall do so in three groups which correspond to the three seasons of the life of ancient Israel. The first season includes three texts that reflect on *the originary claim of having a house*. At the outset Israel assumes all of Yahweh’s people will indeed have a home.

1. Deut. 6:10-13

When the Lord our God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear.

This old account of houses in ancient Israel acknowledges that houses are a free, unearned, inexplicable gift. This uncommon conviction makes sense when we remember that the earliest theological vision and memory in Israel came out of marginal, disadvantaged peasants who were exploited and marginalized.⁵ They had no secure home and no prospect of a secure home. They lived at the whim of the managers of the economy and were endlessly in jeopardy. Then there occurred, abruptly, a theological revolution in the world. Yahweh began to notice and to care and to move. Or as Gottwald prefers, this was a Yahweh-authorized sociopolitical revolution whereby the citadels of monopoly were burned to the ground and goods were made available, which only recently had appeared well beyond any reach or any hope.⁶ Peasants who dared never dream came into unexpected prosperity and security. The text calls this “the triumphs of the Lord, the triumphs of his peasantry in Israel” (Judg. 5:11). What could the peasants say except “Thanks,” uttered with awe and gratitude. That is the beginning of a housing horizon in ancient Israel, “houses you did not fill,” utter gift.

This newly given property is pervasively a covenantal arrangement. The ones who occupy the land and inhabit the houses are bound to the generous giver: “Him you shall fear, you shall serve, you shall swear by.” The house is a gift only in the relation. Notice that Yahweh is now redefined by houses freely given. Houses are likewise redefined by Yahwistic command. Houses are placed irreversibly in the context of covenant, that is, in the context of an alternative social vision and an alternative social requirement. The temptation of Israel is to have houses without Yahweh, and Yahweh without houses, but Deuteronomy will tolerate no retreat from covenantal definitions of social reality. Israel dare not forget, but must remember the strange gift of houses in a world where none seemed available. It is in the form of

a house that this orphan people found mercy.

2. Psalm 112

Praise the Lord!
Happy are those who fear the Lord,
 who greatly delight in his commandments.
Their descendants will be mighty in the land;
 the generation of the upright will be blessed.
Wealth and riches are in their houses,
 and their righteousness endures forever.
They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright;
 they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.
It is well with those who deal generously and lend,
 who conduct their affairs with justice.
For the righteous will never be moved;
 they will be remembered forever.
They are not afraid of evil tidings;
 their heart is firm, secure in the Lord.
Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid;
 in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.
They have distributed freely,
 they have given to the poor;
Their righteousness endures forever;
 their horn is exalted in honor.
The wicked see it and are angry;
 they gnash their teeth and melt away;
The desire of the wicked comes to nothing.

The tradition of Deuteronomy is a tradition of unmerited gift: “It was not because you were more numerous...” (Deut. 7:7). “It was not because of my righteousness...” (Deut. 9:4-5).

There is, however, a second opinion in the Bible about how one comes into possession of a house. Whereas the first tradition (of Deuteronomy) arises out of a community of peasants who were surprised at having a house, this second tradition sounds like the voice of those well situated, who take their adequate housing as their proper claim and entitlement.⁷ I call this a tradition of “self-congratulatory righteousness.” It reflects the sentiment of those who believe that their material situation of prosperity is their right and their achievement, their reward for services rendered.

Thus Psalm 112 is an observation concerning the ones who fear God and keep commandments and who consequently are “mighty in the land.” Their houses are filled with wealth and riches, and they are unendingly righteous.⁸ They practice justice and are “never moved,” that is, never destabilized or placed in jeopardy. They are endlessly steady, secure, stable, generous, and are the envy of the others. People who have secure houses find it persuasive to imagine a stable, well-ordered moral universe where good people are housed and others gnash their teeth and melt away.

This psalm of self-congratulations is echoed by Psalm 37, a meditation on how righteousness yields much prosperity, that is, land. In one of the most unseemly statements in the Bible, the psalmist asserts:

I have been young, and now I am old,
yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken
or their children begging for bread.
They are ever giving liberally and lending,
and their children become a blessing (vv. 25-26).

In a long life of observation of society, the speaker has never seen any righteous person reduced to poverty, nor their children reduced to begging. It is a simple interpretive maneuver to conclude that when one is reduced to poverty or one's children beg for bread, they are the wicked, that is, the undeserving poor.

Admittedly, I have cited two extreme cases. But they are important because they help form the limits of the difficult conversation in the Bible about housing. The two views in Deuteronomy and the Psalms I have cited are sociologically conditioned, reflecting the experience of the surprisingly housed and the complacently housed. These two views run throughout scripture and into our own time. They pose the question of how access to housing is to be discerned in a covenantal world where God makes and keeps promises, where God issues commands, and where God invites obedience and grants rewards.

When Yahweh is social practice as well as sovereign Lord, it makes an enormous difference if there are houses freely given out of God's abundance, or if houses are only a pay-out for a certain kind of socially approved conduct, that is, whether house is gift or pay-out.

3. Deut. 10:12-22

I cite one other text that I would place at the point of origin in the biblical discussion of housing. This remarkable text voices at the same time the largest vision of Yahweh's sovereignty, and the most concrete ethical demand God can utter. On the one hand, this is the one who is "God of gods, Lord of lords, mighty and awesome." On the other hand, this is the God "who takes no bribes, who executes justice for orphans and widows, and who loves strangers." Indeed, this God is at work providing food and clothing for disenfranchised people (v. 18). This is, to be sure, doxological language; but even in doxological language, it is clear that the Lord of lords and God of gods does not give food and clothing to vulnerable outsiders by supernaturalist fiat, but by social practice.

Our point of interest in this text, however, is not in the indicative doxology, but in the derivative imperative:

You shall also love the stranger,
for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (v. 19).⁹

This is an extraordinary ethical imperative which is powered in two ways. First, the imperative asks Israel to do for others what has been done for it. You were displaced and were given a place. Now you give a place to the displaced. Second, and more powerfully, you do what God does. God loves the stranger...you love the stranger. God gives food and clothing... you give food and clothing. You be the social practice whereby God is made visible, available, and effective in the world. You be engaged in God's own work, as you yourself have experienced God's work, creating a safe place of dignity and wholeness for those without rights, claims, or leverage.

Indeed, even Psalm 112 with a lesser passion does not fail to notice that the

blessed housed still have their lives marked by generosity that practices right-wising in society:

They have distributed freely,
they have given to the poor;
Their righteousness endures forever (Ps. 112:9).

Thus the *tradition of revolutionary housing* and the *tradition of stable housing* both insist, with different voices and different passions and different interests, that the housed must tend to the unhoused, because of history, because of memory, because of identity, because of command. The hot tradition of covenant and the cool tradition of prudence converge.¹⁰ In both traditions, Yahweh is a God who encompasses the life of Israel with a larger passion, a passion that works against one's immediate perceived vested interest for the sake of others.

I cite three texts as a baseline, a beginning point: House as *gift and promise* (Deut. 6:10-13), house as *reward for virtue* (Psalm 112), and house as *obligation to the stranger* (Deut. 10:12-22). All of these beginning points suggest a triangle: humanity, God, and house. House is given by God; house is definitionally for humanity.

III

As you know, Israel's social foundation in the Exodus, covenant and wisdom, did not hold. Israel largely succumbed to a practice of greed which was systemic in character, but which had concrete pay-outs in human misery and human rage. It is clear that the disenfranchised in Israel are not regarded as "the unfortunate," or as the "less fortunate," as though social reality was a great mystery that happens without identifiable agent. Israel demystifies the process whereby poverty and homelessness are generated. The disenfranchised are seen to be victims of a rapacious economic system which had lost its rootage in Exodus (by forgetting), in covenant (by not listening), and in wisdom (by being stupid). The texts I will now cite comment on the systemic act of forgetting, not listening, and being stupid as the way Israel tried to live its life, scuttling its identity founded in Exodus, covenant, and wisdom. In the period of Israel's great public greed, it is clear that homelessness is caused by economic rapaciousness. It is equally clear, because of Yahweh's governance, that such programmatic greed will lead to disaster.

1. Two texts voice this prophetic certitude:

Ah, you who join house to house,
who add field to field,
until there is room for no one but you,
and you are left to live alone
in the midst of the land!

The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing:
Surely many houses shall be desolate,
large and beautiful houses,
without inhabitant.

For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath,
and a home of seed shall yield a mere ephah (Isa. 5:8-10).

Premnath has shown that this text reflects a process of latifundization, that is, the process of big owners buying up more and more land, and necessarily displacing little owners and forcing them to live without a place.¹¹ The poetry is poignant. "Until there is no one but you...you are left to live alone," because all the others have been driven out.¹²

Such people-trashing evokes a solemn oath on the part of the Exodus God who has ordered life differently. It is promised by God that the large houses will be abandoned, and the land will become utterly unproductive. The poet anticipates an enormous reversal of the economic process. No clue is given about how this will happen, because this is poetry and not social analysis. Whatever "secondary causes" there may be, we know the name of the primal cause of the destabilization that is sure to come with such neighbor abuse.

The theme of reversal in housing is echoed in Amos 3:13-15:

Hear, and testify against the house of Jacob,
says the Lord God, the God of hosts:
On the day I punish Israel for its transgressions,
I will punish the altars of Bethel,
and the horns of the altar shall be cut off
and fall to the ground.
I will tear down the winter house as well as the summer house;
and the houses of ivory shall perish,
and the great houses shall come to an end, says the Lord.

Again the tone is a solemn oath on God's part. The poem is God's resolve to do the unthinkable against a society that has not thought before it acted. On the other hand, the threat God speaks to an exploitative society is that the apparatus of religious legitimacy will be destroyed. In the horizon of Amos, the shrine at Bethel is the point for the bad neighbor policies of the crown. On the other hand, the houses of the advantaged exploiters will be lost...winter houses, summer houses, houses of ivory, great houses...all will end, because some have too many ill-gotten houses. It is telling that in the book of Amos, this poem is immediately followed in 4:1-2 with a harsh indictment of excessive consumerism at the expense of the poor, an excessive consumerism that will end in exile. The critical poetry of the prophets is not so enthralled of present power arrangements that it cannot imagine what comes next. What comes next is derived from the God of the Exodus, covenant, and wisdom who will not finally tolerate "excessive houses" at the expense of "no houses."

2. The covenantal-prophetic theological polemic against distorted housing and property systems is rooted in the character of God. God's passion, however, is deeply connected to human hurt and rage. Indeed, it may be that God's "preferential option for the homeless" is evoked and led by the passions of the exploited.¹³ For that reason, I include a text which may sound odd in this context. It is Psalm 109, the most angry of all psalms. In this psalm the speaker is not the voice of God in solemn oath, but the voice of an afflicted human speaker venting full rage to God against a neighbor.

The speaker wishes to have the oppressor terminated and his family made homeless:

May his days be few;

may another seize his position.
 May his children be orphans,
 and his wife a widow.
 May his children wander about and beg;
 may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit.
 May the creditor seize all that he has;
 may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil.
 May there be no one to do him a kindness,
 nor anyone to pity his orphaned children.
 May his posterity be cut off;
 may his name be blotted out in the second generation.
 May the iniquity of his father be remembered before the Lord,
 and do not let the sin of his mother be blotted out.
 Let them be before the Lord continually,
 and may his memory be cut off from the earth (vv. 8-15).

That is, we hear a prayer that the oppressor shall be without social place or social identity.

What is most telling in this psalm is the reason for this venomous prayer:

For he did not remember to show *kindness*,
 but pursued the poor and needy
 and the brokenhearted to their death (v.16).

The failure of the oppressor is a failure of *hesed*, the failure of neighbor solidarity.¹⁴ Indeed, the poor and needy in the world of this psalm live by a social contract (covenant) in which the resources of the whole community, that is, the resources of the strong, are shared. This speaker, however, has received no such shared resources, because the strong have violated covenant, and therefore the massive curse is uttered. As a result of such a failure of common humanity, the voice of the abused says:

I am gone like a shadow at evening;
 I am shaken off like a locust.
 My knees are weak through fasting;
 my body has become gaunt.
 I am an object of scorn to my accusers;
 when they see me, they shake their heads (vv. 23-25).

The speaker finally must turn from neighbor to Yahweh in order to find *hesed*:

But you, O Lord my Lord,
 act on my behalf for your name's sake;
 because your *steadfast* love is good, deliver me...
 Save me according to your *steadfast love* (vv. 21,26).

It should be clear, however, that this is not a naive supernaturalism, for Yahweh is social practice as well as transcendent possibility. The prayer is a pained decision to turn from a social practice which negates social solidarity, to a social practice legitimated by Yahweh, which is committed to shared well-being. In this social

practice there may be a social inversion whereby the ostensibly blessed will be properly cursed and the cursed will be blessed.¹⁵

3. Thus the sovereign will of Yahweh (Isa. 5:8-10, Amos 3:13-15) and the hurt of the marginal (Psalm 109) converge in anticipation of a great political-economic reversal. Biblical poetry does not believe that the *status quo* when excessively brutalizing, can long be sustained. This prophetic analysis of the housed and the homeless anticipates that the first will be last, that the proud will be humbled, that as Hannah sings,

Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil (I Sam. 2:5).

And in the psalmic parallel to the Song of Hannah, the poem comes closer to our theme:

He gives the barren woman a home,
making her the joyous mother of children (Psalm 113:9).

The clearest expression of this anticipated inversion is in Micah 2:1-5:

Alas for those who devise wickedness
and evil deeds on their beds!
When the morning dawns, they perform it,
because it is in their power.
They covet fields, and seize them;
houses, and take them away;
They oppress householder and house,
people and their inheritance.
Therefore thus says the Lord:
Now, I am devising against this family an evil
from which you cannot remove your necks;
and you shall not walk haughtily,
for it will be an evil time.
On that day they shall take up a taunt song against you,
and wail with bitter lamentation, and say,
“We are utterly ruined;
the Lord alters the inheritance of my people;
how he removes it from me!
Among our captors he parcels out our fields.”
Therefore you will have no one to cast the line by lot
in the assembly of the Lord (Micah 2:1-5).

The poem pictures the wicked who scheme in their beds. The poem reflects the peasant suspicion of anyone who stays too long in bed in the morning on the phone to the broker.¹⁶ Before they even get up in the morning, they cut a deal, foreclose a mortgage, preempt a property. They covet fields, they take away houses. They violate the old promise of “houses you did not build.” They play monopoly and turn houses into hotels.

Well, says Yahweh, they shall not “advance to go.” They shall not collect \$200.

They shall go directly into social rejection. As they “devise” in v. 1, so now Yahweh in v. 3 will “devise” against them. The tenth commandment, “Thou shall not covet,” is a line drawn in the sand to protect the poor from the strong who have such good brokers and smart lawyers. Coveting, even if it is legal, will finally bring terror of a very public kind. There will come evil, intrusion, and violation of those who mock the tenth commandment.

“On that day,” on the day of social pay-out, there will be grief and sad songs and despair. There will be funerals and suicides. “On that day,” the monopolizers will notice that Yahweh takes homes away from those who have seized too much. “On that day,” an invading army will occupy the fields. The ones who have coveted will not be able to keep what they have taken.

Verse 5 in this poem is odd, but its point is unmistakably clear. There will be an urgent meeting at the county courthouse, that is, in “the assembly of the Lord.” That meeting will be called to reorder the local economy; the purpose of the meeting is to draw new property lines, that is, the redistribution of the land. And when that meeting is held, there will be no one to “cast the line” for you, no one to protect your interests, to advocate, to offer bids, no one to secure the land. When the land is redistributed, they will be left with nothing, displaced, with no place. They will be like the ones they victimized, and now they themselves will be utterly helpless.

This poem reflects village ethics, a small farmer-elder, railing against the urban economy, against the big banks and the cynical insurance companies, against an owned government and bought-off courts whose horizon does not extend past the class that owns it.¹⁷ The peasants are helpless against such great engines of wealth and power. This social analysis offered by Micah, however, is different, because Yahweh is indeed a source of rescue, a line against self-sufficiency, a threat and advocate, a promiser.

It may be that the strong will go on possessing, able to take their usurpacious action against the villagers:

Their mouths are filled with cursing and deceit and oppression;
under their tongues are mischief and iniquity.
They sit in ambush in the villages;
in hiding places they murder the innocent (Psalm 10:7-8).

In the universe of discourse in Psalms 9-10, however, the problem of the house is redefined. A petition is uttered (Ps. 10:12-18). Its first line is:

Rise up, O Lord; O God lift up your hand,
do not forget the oppressed (v. 12).

The petition includes the lines:

The helpless commit themselves to you;
you have been the helper of the orphan (v. 14).

It concludes:

You will incline your ear
to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed,

so that those from earth may strike terror no more (vv. 17-18).

The psalm provides a way in which Yahweh, the great housing equalizer, can redress the inequity, and override the destructive self-sufficiency of the complacently housed.

These texts from Isaiah 5:8-10, Amos 3:13-15, Psalm 109, and Micah 2:1-5, where social hurt and heavenly insistence converge, affirm that the power to produce homelessness will not go unchecked. There is an answering, and an inversion that the complacent cannot avoid.

IV

As you know, the terrible inversion, anticipated by the prophets, happened in ancient Israel in 587, when Israel's rapacious socioeconomic policies terminated in deportation for some and devastation for all. The city became a burnt-out crater. In that terrible moment, responsible hope was required. Gone now are the harshest prophetic strictures; silenced is the relentless voice of threat.

I will cite two texts from III Isaiah, which show a community regrouping, to recover a human fabric which rapaciousness and displacement have destroyed.

1. On the other hand, the recovering of a viable human infrastructure requires concrete action by those who have not succumbed to selfishness. Instead of manipulative religious practice (Isa. 58:1-5), the rebuilding of the infrastructure which makes human life possible entails concrete neighbor-imperatives:

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to unloose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin (Isa. 58:6-7)?

This must in the end be the primal text for our subject. In quick order, in five quick lines, we arrive at Yahweh's central passion, of Israel's central mandate, of humanity's central hope. It is all "hands on." The ones who are characteristically in bonds and yokes and oppressed are of course the poor. The metaphor concerns economics. The ones who are locked in, in poverty cycles, inevitably lack bread, housing, and clothing. This great triad of neighbor love is at the same time the great triad of Yahweh's passion for a reformed community of humanity in obedience. It is this text that lies below the surface of the great judgment scene of Matt. 25, which brings so close together God's own person and the reality of the needy.¹⁸

When this new fast of neighbor care is undertaken, light and healing come. The world works again and God is again available and powerfully present:

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,

the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, "Here I am" (vv. 8-9).

The end result is the voice of Yahweh assuring, "Here I am." I am here, where bread, and house, and clothing are shared. And where there is no such sharing, there will be no such healing presence.

2. That great imperative is matched seven chapters later, still in III Isaiah, by the most comprehensive promise in the Old Testament, a promise of new heaven, new earth, new city. That new city with a covenantal infrastructure is characterized by the poet in great detail. The one detail that concerns us is in 65:21-22:

They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

The poem images a stable, equitable community in which threat, danger, greed, rapaciousness, instability, and displacement do not operate. The promise is that houses will be safe for living, not attacked, not jeopardized, not foreclosed, that gardens will be safe and not usurped, not invaded, not occupied, not taxed to oblivion. The promise intends to override the danger of a disordered society. In that society, Amos had asserted:

Therefore because you trample on the poor
and take from them levies of grain,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine (Amos 5:11).

The terrible jeopardy voiced by Amos now in Isaiah 65 is overridden. All is safe, "all is well and all shall be well."¹⁹ This great promise is a word to keep us from succumbing to despair, even about the housing crisis. The command of Isa. 58 makes clear that housing is indeed our work to do. It is to be done by caring, obedient people. That human work, however, is encompassed about by the promise of God. It is promised that God will create a new infrastructure of adequate, safe housing. It is promised we know not how. It is promised! It is promised that the present engines of homelessness will not prevail, that coveting cannot last, that monopoly and greed will not have a final say.

Thus the two texts from late Isaiah belong together. The *imperative* of chapter 58 counters our self preoccupation. The *promise* of chapter 65 speaks against our exhausted despair. Our talk is not a complete solution to the housing crisis, as though the imperative could manage without the promise. Our task, however, is ongoing and urgent, while God broods over ultimate possibility. It is clear in both Isaiah 58 and 65, in both imperative and promise, against both selfishness and despair, that housing is a big deal to God. This God does not play monopoly for God's own

aggrandizement, but intends for all to have houses, whether because the righteous deserve a house or because houses are freely given to all.

I conclude this section on a new infrastructure for exiles by reference to I Peter and the ground-breaking study of John Elliott.²⁰ In his book, *A Home for the Homeless*, Elliott has seen that I Peter enjoins the Christian community to provide a home (*oikia*) for the homeless (*paroikia*), that is, for exiles and displaced persons. Further, Elliott has shown that the terms for “home and homeless” in the epistle have concrete socioeconomic significance and should not be spiritualized into evaporation.

Elliott thus suggests that the church, according to this epistle, is under mandate to construct a new mediating structure, larger than the family, smaller than the state, a structure for homefulness, for those who had lost place in the homeless-producing Roman Empire. Insofar as the epistle is linked to baptism, as it is according to critical judgment, baptism becomes a gesture of embracing the work of *homefulness* in a world of *homelessness*.

V

Finally, I come to draw modest conclusions. We have come a very long way since Hosea 14:3, “In thee the orphan finds mercy.” But not really a long way, for I have argued that the entire life history of this community of faith is a struggle to be a house-building, home-making enterprise in a world endlessly productive of homelessness. As I have shaped our primal memory,

The early season is marked by gift of homes you did not build,
and by a demand to imitate God’s home-making propensity.
The middle season is dominated by greed, by big ones eating
little ones, and by the production of homelessness, and
the dire warnings of what happens to coveters.
The late season of displacement issues in imperatives and
promises the concern of a new human, covenantal infrastructure.

What emerges from this study is that the eye of God and the hand of God’s people are endlessly upon widows, orphans, and sojourners, those classic victims of displacement.²¹ God intends that the displaced shall be commodiously placed in an ordered, secure human community. God has summoned and formed this Israel-Church-new humanity in order to be a protector, an inventor, an alternative, a gadfly, a subverter, a hope, that the dominant modes of exile-production need not prevail in the world.

It is stunning that the vision of the church among exiles in I Peter reclaims the identity of the liberated slaves who rushed to Sinai to rethink and repractice a covenantal human infrastructure. The connection between Exodus at the beginning and I Peter at the end can be argued sociologically. They both reflect communities capable of thinking and acting differently. But the connection between the early memory and the late resolve can also be seen in concrete textual usage. It is from Exodus, Sinai, and Moses that Peter writes:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,
God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts

of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.
Once you were not a people,
 but now you are God's people;
Once you had not received mercy,
 but now you have received mercy (I Peter 2:9-10).

The church is invited to see itself set in the world with a priestly role, to proclaim and practice God's mighty acts, to be the *mode of mercy* which orphans receive from God. Preaching is a chance to let the practice of mercy touch the reality of God's displaced orphans.

I conclude with four questions which may haunt us as we do the awesome work of preaching:

1. Is it true that some lack a home because some have too much house?
2. Is it true that we seek too much house at the expense of our neighbors, because we ourselves are deeply homeless?²²
3. Is it true that one cannot care deeply about homes for others, until we find our true homefulness?
4. What did he mean when he said:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.... Therefore do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What will we wear?"

For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things (Matt. 6:25-32).

We are, as you know, children of the Holy One who already knows we need all these things — as do the others.

NOTES

¹ See, for example, Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Hosea*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 231-32. But against such a tendency, see Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 24 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), 645-46.

² See Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 31-59.

³ See Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), Norman K. Gottwald, ed., *Social Scientific Criticism of the Hebrew Bible and Its Social World: The Israelite Monarchy, Semeia* 37 (1986), and Frank S. Frick, *The Formation of the State in Ancient Israel, The Social World of Biblical Antiquity Series* 4 (Sheffield: JOST Press, 1985).

⁴ See the discussion of this text by Jose Miranda, *Marx and the Bible; A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1974), 47-72.

⁵ It is of course the case that the refraction of that early vision in the tradition of Deuteronomy is formulated much later. Nonetheless, the passions which drive the tradition are surely rooted in the faith and social experience of the very origins of Israel. On critical questions related to the tradition of Deuteronomy, see the most recent study of Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *Deuteronomy, Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990).

⁶ I am following the hypothesis of a "peasant revolt" proposed by George E. Mendenhall and carefully pursued by Norman Gottwald. That hypothesis makes the most sense out of the violent destructions through which the promises of God were fulfilled to land-hungry Israel. See my discussion of that violence, Walter Brueggemann, *Revelation and Violence: A Study in Contextualization*, The 1986 Pere Marquette Theology Lecture (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1986).

⁷ Harvey H. Guthrie, Jr., *Theology as Thanksgiving; From Israel's Psalms to the Church's Eucharist*

(New York: Seabury Press, 1981), 19-21, has nicely suggested a correlation between social setting and liturgical voicing.

⁸ See the same claims of well-being for the righteous in Job 21:7-16, only now uttered ironically and polemically.

⁹ On the power of this memory, see Cynthia Ozick, *Metaphor and Memory; Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 265-83.

¹⁰ On the categories of "hot" and "cool," see Walter Brueggemann, "Passion and Perspective; Two Dimensions of Education in the Bible," *Theology Today* 42 (1985): 172-80.

¹¹ D.N. Premnath, "Latifundialization and Isaiah 5:8-10," *JSOT* 40 (1988): 49-60. See also John Andrew Dearman, *Property Rights in the Eighth-Century Prophets: the Conflict and Its Background*, SBL Dissertation Series 106 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988). Wendall Berry, *A Place on Earth* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983) has written gracefully and positively about the ordering of a community with safe land in which everyone is "placed" with dignity and well-being. Moreover, he has done so without a tinge of the romantic.

¹² Perhaps the man in the parable of Luke 12:16-20 is the concrete embodiment of this oracle. This man lives for coveting, celebrates alone, and dies in his foolishness.

¹³ That God should follow the urgings of the oppressed who cry out is the premise of the lament-complaint prayers of Israel. See Ee Kon Kim, "'Outcry' Its Context in Biblical Theology," *Interpretation* 42 (1988): 229-39, and Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer as a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), especially 11-14.

¹⁴ On the Psalm, see Walter Brueggemann, "Psalm 109: Three Times 'Steadfast Love'," *Word & World* 5 (1985): 144-54.

¹⁵ On the great reversal, see Luke 6:20-23.

¹⁶ On such a social analysis in relation to this text, see Hans Walter Wolff, "Micah the Moreshite - The Prophet and His Background," *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien*, ed. John G. Gammie et. al., (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978), 77-84, and his citation of the programmatic work of Albrecht Alt in n. 9.

¹⁷ Delbert R. Hillers, *Micah*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 33, rejects the particular social analysis of Alt, but on the whole follows his reading of the text.

¹⁸ The other text which also seems to play in Matthew 25 is Ezekiel 34:11-16.

¹⁹ The phrase is of course from Julian of Norwich. See Julian of Norwich *Showings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 225 and *passim*. The usage of Julian is of course very different. I cite it to suggest the linkage between spiritual well-being and material justice. It is the hope of prophetic faith that *all* will be well.

²⁰ John H. Elliott *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of I Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981). On the "household" as a focus of early Christianity, see M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) and the splendid study of the Gospel of Matthew by Michael H. Crosby, *House of Disciples: Church, Economics, and Justice in Matthew* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988).

²¹ I know of no careful study of the status of "orphan" in these texts. On the widow, see Paula S. Hiebert, "'Whence Shall Help Come to Me?' The Biblical Widow," *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed., Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 125-41. It is fair to translate from widow to orphan in terms of social analysis, because the two shared the same jeopardy and vulnerability when the male protector was lost.

²² On the social, spiritual dimension of homelessness, see Peter Berger et.al., *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).