

An Imaginative “Or”

Walter Brueggemann

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

Perhaps the assigned theme, “preaching from the Old Testament,” is intended to raise the sticky christological issue about finishing up OT texts with Jesus. The question is difficult and I should say where I am. I believe the Old Testament leads to the New and to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It does not, however, lead there directly, but only with immense interpretive agility. It does not, moreover, lead there singularly and necessarily in my judgment, because it also leads to Judaism and to the synagogue with its parallel faith. I shall bracket out of my consideration the christological question with the recognition, put in trinitarian terms, that in the Old Testament we speak of the Father of the Son.¹ As we confess the fullness of the Father manifest in the Son, so we may confess the fullness of God manifest to Israel in the Father. This is a question of endless dispute, but I owe it to you to be clear on my own conviction.

I.

Rather than the christological question, I shall focus on the ecclesial question. I understand preaching to be the chance to *summon and nurture an alternative community with an alternative identity, vision, and vocation, preoccupied with praise and obedience toward the God we Christians know fully in Jesus of Nazareth*. (This accent on alternative community resonates with the point being made in current “Gospel and Culture” conversation, much propelled by Lesslie Newbigin’s focus on election, that God in God’s inscrutable wisdom has chosen a people whereby the creation will be brought to wholeness).² Two other beginning points make the community-forming work of the Old Testament peculiarly contemporary for us.

First, it is crucial to remember that the Old Testament is zealously and pervasively a Jewish book. Jews, and Israelites before them, are characteristically presented and understand themselves to be a distinct community with an alternative identity *rooted theologically and exhibited ethically*—alternative to the Egyptians, the Canaanites, the Philistines, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, and the Hellenists—not only alternative but always subordinate to and under threat from dominant culture.³ Thus I understand the intention of the Torah and prophets—and differently I believe also wisdom—to be insisting upon *difference* with theological rootage and ethical exhibit. The God question is decisive, even if back-grounded, but the urgency concerns maintenance of communal identity, consciousness, and intentionality.

Second, with the disestablishment of Western Christianity and the collapse of the social hegemony of the church, the formation of a distinctive community of praise and obedience now becomes urgent as it had not been when the Western church could count on the support and collusion of dominant culture. If the church in our society is not to evaporate into an ocean of consumerism and anti-neighborly individualism, then the summons and nurture of an alternative community constitutes an emergency. Thus with a huge *mutatis mutandis*, I propose that as the Jews lived in a perennial emergency of identity, so the church in our time and place lives in such an emergency.⁴ In both cases, moreover, a primal response to the emergency and a primal antidote to assimilation and evaporation is the chance of preaching. In reflection upon the Old

Testament and the ecclesial emergency, I will consider three theses.

II.

The summons and nurture, formation and enhancement of an alternative community of praise and obedience *depends upon the clear articulation of an either/or, the offer of a choice and the requirement of a decision that is theologically rooted and ethically exhibited, that touches and pervades every facet of the life of the community and its members.*⁵ The choice is presented as clear. I believe that this *either/or* belongs inevitably to an alternative community, because an alternative identity requires an endless intentionality. For without vigilance the alternative cannot be sustained. I have reflected upon Old Testament texts around this theme; my impression is that there are only rare texts that are "holding actions." Everything in Israel's text urges an alternative.

The alternative that must be embraced in order to be Israel includes the summons to Abraham and Sarah to "go," for without going there will be no land and no future, no heir and no Israel. The summons to slaves in Egypt through Moses is to "depart," for if there is no "departure" there is no promised land. Moses worries, moreover, that if Israel does not believe, it will not depart and will not be Israel (Ex. 4:1).⁶ Less instantaneous but certainly pervasively, the prophets endlessly summon Israel to an alternative covenant ethic, lest the community be destroyed. And even in the wisdom traditions, the restrained advocacy of wisdom and righteousness is in the awareness that foolishness will indeed bring termination. Perhaps the most dominant statement of *either/or* that belongs characteristically to the faith perspective of the Old Testament is the context at Mt. Carmel where Elijah challenges Israel: "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). We are told first, "The people did not answer him a word" (v. 21b). But at the end they said, "The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God" (v. 39). This text knows that Israel, in order to be the people of Yahweh, must be endlessly engaged in an intentional decision for Yahwism, a decision that fends off the powerful forces of the dominant culture.⁷

I wish now to consider in some detail two classic formulations of *either/or* that occur at pivotal points in Israel's life. The first of these is Joshua 24, a much discussed text that von Rad regarded as an ancient credo that is situated as the culmination of the Hexateuch.⁸ The meeting at Shechem over which Joshua presides is set canonically just as Israel is situated in the land. Joshua 1-12 concerns control of the land, albeit by violence, and Joshua 13-21 concerns division of the land among the tribes. I read this moment as Israel's arrival at security, well-being, affluence, and rare self-congratulations. The text is presented as a *bid to non-Israelites* to join up.⁹ I shall consider that a fictional staging, so that the text is in fact a *bid to Israelites* in their new affluence to reembrace the faith of the Yahwistic covenant. The text (and Joshua) know that there are indeed attractive alternatives, alternatives that Israel must resist.

As von Rad saw most clearly, vv. 2-13 is a recital of Israel's core memory.¹⁰ It includes the ancestors of Genesis (vv. 2-4), the Exodus (vv. 5-7a), the wilderness sojourn (v. 7b), and the entry into the land (vv. 8-13). This latter theme ends:

I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant (v. 13).

It is all gift!

After this recital, the speaker (here Joshua the preacher) makes his bid for allegiance to this particular narrative construal of reality: "fear and serve Yahweh in completeness and in faithfulness." Negatively: "put away the other gods." Positively: "serve Yahweh." *Choose*: If Yahweh. . .if not then, option a) is the gods of the Euphrates valley, option b) is the Amorite gods in the land. Choose! Then says the preacher, "those in my household will serve Yahweh," and will put our lives down in the Yahweh narrative just recited. But if you refuse this narrative, then put your life down somewhere else and live with the consequences. No doubt the entire Hexateuch has been pointed to this moment. The Pentateuch consists of the live narrative of Yahweh that generates a world of gift and liberation and demand about which decisions must be made.¹¹

Then follows in vv. 16-24 a dialogue about church growth. The exchange of Joshua and the community is a negotiation about the *either/or*.

People (vv. 16-18): Far be us from us to serve other gods...we will serve Yahweh,¹²

Joshua (vv. 19-20): You cannot do it. It is too hard and Yahweh is more ferocious than you imagine (No growth seduction here).

People (v. 21): No, we are committed. We will serve Yahweh.

Joshua (v. 22a): You are witnesses...you are on notice.

People (v. 22b): Yes we are.

Joshua (23): with an imperative:

Negative: put away foreign gods.¹³

Positive: extend your hearts to Yahweh.

Conclusion (v. 25):

Joshua made a covenant with Torah demands.

This particular crisis of *either/or* is negotiated and Israel comes to be, yet again, an intentional alternative community, alternative to the gods of the land.

The second case of *either/or* that I cite is in II Isaiah. This wondrous text is situated in the exile. That is, the context is exactly the opposite of Joshua 24. There it was excessive security in the land. Here it is complete displacement from the religious, cultural supports of Jerusalem, set down in an ocean of Babylonian seductions and intimidations, with effective Babylonian economics and seemingly effective Babylonian gods. No doubt many deported Jews found it easier to be a Babylonian Jew, and for some that status was only a transition to becoming Babylonian. The lean choice of remaining Jews embedded in Yahweh depended upon having the *either/or* made plain,

for without the *either/or*, cultural accommodation and assimilation go unchecked.

It is precisely the work of II Isaiah to state the alternative, so that Jews tempted by Babylon have a real choice available to them. The text of II Isaiah is well known to us (unfortunately Handel reworked it so that the *either/or* is not at all visible). The recurring accent of II Isaiah is that it is now the emergency moment when Jews may and must depart Babylon. In our historical criticism, we have focused much on Cyrus and the overturn of Babylon by the Persians, so that the emancipation of the Jews is a geo-political event. No doubt there is something in that. But I suggest not so much, because the primal departure from Babylon is not geographical, but imaginative, liturgical, and emotional: imagine Jewishness, imagine distinctiveness that has not succumbed to the pressures and seductions of the empire. From this familiar poetry of departure and distinctiveness, I will mention four characteristic elements.

1. The initial announcement, “comfort, comfort,” is an assertion to Jews displaced by Yahweh’s anger that caring embrace by Yahweh is now the order of the day: “For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you” (54:7). The Jews in exile are addressed as the forgiven, as the welcomed, as the cherished. They had pondered, for two generations, rejection by Yahweh. But to be forgiven, welcomed, and cherished invites the reembrace of Jewishness. The poet, moreover, draws out the scenario of wondrous, jubilant, victorious procession back to Jerusalem, back to Jewishness, back to alternative identity (40:3-8). It is in this reassertion and reenactment of Jewishness that the glory of Yahweh is revealed before all flesh. These Jews in this uncommon identity, moreover, are surrounded by the God who leads like a triumphant general and the God who does the rearguard pickup in order to salvage the dropouts:

See, the Lord comes with might,
and his arm rules for him...
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep. (40:10-11)

The purpose of the poetic opener is to permit the community to reexperience the embrave quality of Jewishness welcomed in its peculiarity.

2. In order to create imaginative space for Jewishness, the poet employs two kinds of rhetorical strategies.¹⁴ First, it is important to debunk the vaunted powers of Babylon. This is done by teasing and mocking the gods of the empire. In 46:1-2, the gods are mocked as dumb statues that must be carried around on the backs of animals, like so many meaningless floats in a May day parade. The ridicule is like the old humor at the chiefs of the Soviet Union or the mocking of “whitey” that Black people have had do for their own health and sanity. Or the poet holds a mock trial in order to show how weak and ineffectual are the imperial gods who are passive, silent, dormant, all failures who can do neither good nor evil (41:21-29). The intention of such speech is to dress down the powers of domination, to exhibit courage in the face of power, to show that the choice of Babylon that looks so impressive is in the end sheer foolishness.

3. This debunking is matched by the vigorous reassertion of Yahweh as the most

reliable player in the struggle for the future. In the salvation oracles, this poet has Yahweh repeatedly say to terrified Jews, “fear not.” “Fear not, I am with you.” “Fear not, I will help you.” “Fear not,” be a Jew. The poet knows that the empire traffics in fear and intimidation with its uniforms, its parades, its limousines, its press conferences, its agents with dark glasses, and its intrusions in the night. All is for nought, because Yahweh is the great Equalizer who creates safe space and overrides the threat of dominant claims.

4. Finally, looking back on the highway of chapter 40 and the fearless safe return that the dumb Babylonian gods cannot stop—nothing can stop resolved Jewishness—the poem announces the departure: “Depart, depart, go out from there” (52:11)! They could remember the ancient “departure” from Egypt. They remembered every passover by means of unleavened bread. The lack of leavening recalled that they left in a hurry, with no time for the yeast to rise. This is a like emergency and a like departure. Except,

For you shall not go out in haste,
and you shall not go in flight;
for the Lord will go before you,
and the God of Israel will be your rear guard. (52:12)

No rush. Leave at your convenience. First class passengers may board at their leisure for the journey back to full, alternative Jewishness: “For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace” (55:12).

They might not depart the emotional grip of Babylon on the day they first hear the poem; but the poetry lingers. Alternative identity, even in places of threat and seduction, is embraced as the invitation does its proper work.

III.

The *either/or* of distinctive identity for praise and obedience is not self-evident in the nature of things, but *depends completely and exclusively upon the courageous utterance of witnesses who voice choices and invite decisions where none were self-evident*. My accent on the urgency of preaching the *either/or* is grounded in my conviction that Israel lives by a certain kind of utterance without which Israel has no chance to live. It is for this reason that I have insisted in my recent book on Old Testament theology that Old Testament claims for God finally do not appeal to historical facticity or to ontology, but rely upon the utterance of witnesses to offer what is not self-evident or otherwise available.¹⁵ This is indeed “theology of the word,” by which I mean simply and leanly and crucially *utterance*.

I take as my primary case II Isaiah, admittedly an easy case; but I would extrapolate from II Isaiah to claim the entire Old Testament is utterance that expresses *either/or* that is not self-evident.¹⁶ The massive hegemony of Babylon—political, economic, theological—had, so far as we know, well nigh driven Jewishness from the horizon; and with the elimination of Jewishness it had vetoed Yahweh from the theological conversation. It is the intention of every hegemony to eliminate separatist construals of reality that are endlessly inconvenient and problematic, and certainly a separatism as dangerous as Jewishness that endlessly subverts. The tale of Daniel, perhaps later but clearly reflective of the Babylonian crisis, tells the tale of how Nebuchadnezzar is

enraged that Jews should refuse imperial allegiance and hold to their odd alternative claim (Dan. 3:13-15).

This power of hegemony, moreover, matched the exiles' own sense of things, for they also had concluded that Yahweh was not engaged or worth trusting:

Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
"My way is hidden from the Lord,
and my right is disregarded by my God"? (40:27)

But Zion said, "The lord has forsaken me,
my Lord has forgotten me." (49:14)

Is my hand shortened, that I cannot redeem?
Or have I no power to deliver? (50:2)

It is in such an environment of hegemony-cum-despair that the utterance of *either/or* takes place. It is the utterance of *either/or* that shapes the perceptual field of Israel anew, to become aware of resources not recognized, of dangers not acknowledged, and of choices that had not seemed available. I shall consider this new, subversive voice of *either/or* in two waves. First, II Isaiah himself, perhaps someone who had arisen out of a continuing seminar on the text of I Isaiah, is now moved to generate and extrapolate new text. "Moved," I say, because some think it was by an out-of-the-ordinary confrontation in "the divine council": when the voices say "Cry...what shall I cry...get you up on a high mountain, herald of good tidings," the one moved by divine imperative is none other than II Isaiah, who moves out from this theological experience to reshape the lived emergency of Israel.

It is this poet who gives to the rhetoric of the synagogue and church the term "gospel."¹⁷ Indeed, I suggest provisionally that gospel is the offer of an *either/or* where none seemed available. So in 40:9:

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of *gospel tidings*,
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of *gospel tidings*,
lift it up, do not fear.

The gospeler is twice named. The gospeler, moreover, is given the utterance to be sounded: "Behold, your God," or in NRSV, "Here is your God." It is the exhibit of Yahweh as God of the exiles in a context where Babylon had banished the God of the exiles so that there were only Babylonian gods available. The news is that Yahweh is back in play, creating choices. Yahweh is back in play on the lips of the one moved to new utterance.

That text in 40:9 is matched in 52:7 in a better known utterance:

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the *gospel messenger*

who announces peace,
who brings *gospel news*,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

Again the term *gospel* is twice used, and again the lines are given: "Your God reigns," or better, "Your God has just become king." The line is a quote from the Psalms (see 96:10), but the utterance here is an assertion that in the contest for domination, the gods of the empire have been defeated and the God of Israel is now the dominant force in creation. The poet creates an environment for choice, for decision, for homecoming, for new, faithful action, none of which is available or choosable without this utterance.

It is, however, the second layer of utterance in this poetry that interests me, namely that the Israelites are summoned by the poet to be witnesses, to give testimony about the Yahwistic alternative about which they did not know and which the Babylonians certainly could never tolerate. In 43:8-13, the poet offers a contest among the gods. Negatively he invites the Babylonians to give evidence for their gods: "Let them bring forth their witnesses" (v. 9). Then in v. 10: "You are my witnesses," you exiles. You are the ones who are to speak my name, confess my authority, obey my will, accept my emancipation, tell my miracles. The exiles who themselves had thought there was no *or* to the Babylonian *either* are now called to testify to this Yahwistic *or*. There are two quite remarkable features to this poem authorizing Israel's testimonial utterance about an alternative that the empire cannot tolerate.

First, the summons and authorization to testify is interwoven with *the substance of testimony* that is to be given:

Before me no god was formed,
nor shall there be any after me.
I, I am the Lord,
and besides me there is no savior...
I am God, and also henceforth I am He;
there is no one who can
deliver from my hand;
I work and who can hinder it? (vv. 10b-11, 13)

What is to be said is that Yahweh is the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the creator, the one who is utterly irresistible. Note well that this extravagant claim allows no room for any Babylonian gods. In the statement of the *either/or*, the Babylonian *either* is dismissed as an irrelevant fantasy. There is only the Yahwistic *or* as an option.

Now we might suspect that this is a frontal assault to convince the Babylonians. Perhaps so. But the second feature I observe in v. 10 is this:

You are my witnesses, says the Lord,
and my servant whom I have chosen,
so that you may know and believe me
and understand that I am he.

Notice: You are my witnesses. . . in order that. . . *you may know, believe, understand!*

The giving of testimony is to claim the ones who testify. Israel is to enunciate the Yahwistic option so that they themselves should trust and embrace that option. This is surely the most direct claim I know concerning Paul's assertion that faith comes from what is heard (Romans 10:17); where there is not speaking and hearing of an alternative world, there is no faith, no courage, no freedom to choose differently, no community of faith apart from and even against the empire.

The other remarkable text is 44:8, followed by the negative of 44:9. It is clear that vv. 8 and 9 belong to quite different literary units; they are joined together perhaps to make the point about utterance. Verse 8 asserts yet again, "You are my witnesses." The last two lines of the verse, just as we have seen in chapter 43, outline the utterance that is to be uttered: "Is there any god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one."

The testimony is that there is not only a choice outside Babylon. It is the only real choice. The new feature here, after chapter 43, is the first line of the verse to the witnesses now being recruited: "Do not fear, or be afraid." One can imagine a lawyer briefing a witness, perhaps a witness who is a whistle blower against a great corporation, who must say in court what the company cannot tolerate: "do not be afraid." Or one can imagine a women in a rape trial who must give evidence, but is terrified both of the shame and of the continuing threat of the rapist: "do not fear." The lawyer must encourage and reassure. Every witness, every serious preacher, every exile who speaks against hegemony knows the fear. And Yahweh says, state the *or*, because it is true. Many witnesses discover, of course, that Yahweh in the end has no "witness protection program," but the witness is often compelled to give evidence nonetheless.

The negative of v. 9 is surprising. Verses 9-20 constitute an odd unit that mocks the makers of idols, the Babylonians who manufacture powerless gods. Verse 9 speaks of idols and then of witnesses, that is, the Babylonian gods and the Babylonians who champion them or Jews who trust those imperial gods too much. The idols are, with the NRSV, "nothing." The term looks like a simple rejection. But the Hebrew *tôhû* = chaos. The Babylonian gods are embodiments of chaos, forces of disorder. This is a remarkable claim, for the empire had claimed to be a great sponsor of order and well-being. But here it is clear: the spiritual force of the empire is against *shalom*, against peace and order and well-being. The *tôhû* of Babylon of course is to be contrasted with the power of the true creator God, Yahweh. Finally it is asserted that the witnesses who champion the gods of *tôhû* neither see nor know. They are so narcotized and mesmerized by the empire that they cannot see what is going on. The contrast is total, no overlap between these two god offers. The exiles can choose either *the gods of the empire* who will never deliver the well-being they claim to sponsor, or *the God of the news* who stands against all things fearful. The battle for Jewishness in exile is acute, a battle now replicated in the battle for baptism in an ocean of military consumerism that generates endless layers of chaos in the name of prosperity.

To be sure, II Isaiah is an easy case for *either/or* through utterance. But I would argue that the theme is pervasive in the text of this people always struggling for its identity. Perhaps you noticed in my longish comment on Joshua 24 that Joshua and his counterparts finally get serious precisely about testimony. He says to them: "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him" (v. 22). The answer, "Witnesses." The Hebrew is terse, without a nominative pronoun. My

point is a simple one. Everything depends upon utterance. The dramatic occasions of teaching and preaching where the *either/or* is spelled out and sometimes embraced, are serious occasions, serious not simply because of formal oath or because we claim to be speaking true, but serious elementally because *what we say* and *how we say* is the world we receive. Israel's serious oath is to choose the *or* of Yahweh and to hold to it (see also v. 27).

It would be nice if the *either/or* were simply out there in the landscape. Israel, however, knows better. It is here, in speech. If it is not uttered, it is not available. If it is not uttered, it is not. This point, that human possibility resides in utterance, it seems to me, is crucial not only for preaching, but more generally in a technological society.¹⁸ Our technological mindset wants to thin, reduce, and eventually silence serious speech. The urgency of preaching and all the utterance of the church and the synagogue, I suggest, is that we know intuitively that where there is not face-to-face truth-telling, we are by that much diminished in the human enterprise. And Joshua insists, Israel must stand by its utterance.¹⁹

IV.

While the *either/or* may be uttered frontally, *the or of Yahweh is characteristically spoken in figure*, because it is a possibility "at hand" but not yet in hand.²⁰ The *either/or* of Yahwism is directly utterable, and I have cited cases of such direct utterance. Characteristically, however, it is not done tersely and confrontationally, because such utterance is too lean, gives the listeners few resources for the tricky negotiation between options, and because the *either/or*, having no one shape or form, is always different with different folk in different circumstance. Moreover, while the *either* of hegemony is visible and can be described in some detail, the *or* of Yahweh does not admit of flat description because it is not yet visible, not yet in hand, always about to be, always under construal, always just beyond us. Indeed, if the *or* of Yahweh could be fully and exhaustively described, the prospect is that it would become, almost immediately, some new hegemonic *either*, as is often the case if creeds are heard too flatly, if liturgies are held too closely, if ethics is turned to legalism, if piety becomes self-confidence and pride. It is this open act of imagination in the service of a demanding, healing *or* that is the primary hard work of the preacher and the wonder of good preaching that is communicated in modes outside hegemonic certitude.

I will return to my two major cases and then in conclusion note three other places where one can see some playfulness at work in utterance.

1. I have characterized Joshua 24 as a primary model of *either/or* in which testimonial utterance is evident. That utterance of *either/or* in solemn assembly by Joshua culminates in v. 25: "So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem." The verse tells us almost nothing of what constitutes the new obedience to which Israel is pledged after this hard-won decision to embrace Yahweh's *or*. I suggest that because Joshua 24 is about the immediate settlement in the land, the Torah of Deuteronomy is the figurative articulation that fleshes out the *either/or* announced in Joshua 24. For the sake of that connection, I make two critical observations. First, it is generally agreed that Deuteronomy constitutes the norm for the "history" offered in Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, the "Deuteronomic" account of Israel's life in the land.²¹ Thus the linkage between Deuteronomy and Joshua 24 is entirely plausible; Joshua 24:25

alludes to that Torah. Second, because Deuteronomy is “Deuteronomic,” we are free to say that its framing is fictive, that the staging of the speech of Moses at the Jordan is an invitation for Israel that has embraced the Yahwistic *or* against the Canaanite *either* to conjure what the land of promise would be like were it alternatively organized and practiced in covenant. This delivers us from needing to insist that Israel enacted all these laws, but it also permits us to see the “laws” as acts of imagination in which each successive generation of *or* is to explore how to take this text into its own concrete life and practice.

I shall comment on three texts from Deuteronomy. The ones I have selected are perhaps easy cases, but the point will be more generally clear. Joshua counts on the clear *either/or* worked in detail by Moses:

1. *Either* let the economy work unfettered so that the rich become richer, *or* read Deut. 15:1-18 on the “Year of Release.”²² Moses, in this text, anticipates and imagines that the economy of the land of Canaan does not need to be organized in exploitative “Canaanite” ways, but could be reorganized in neighborly Israelite ways. He offers a scenario for a society in which poor people must work off their debts (no doubt at high interest rates), but a neighborly ethic proposes that at the end of six years, the debt is cancelled and the poor person is invited back into the economy.

—Moses said, “There will always be poor people,” so you must take this seriously and keep doing it all the time (v. 11);

—Moses said, If you do it effectively, you can eliminate such demeaning poverty and “the poor will cease out of the land” (v. 4);

—Moses said, “Do not entertain mean thoughts and begin to count toward the seventh year and act in hostility” (v. 9);

—Moses said, do not only cancel the debt but give the poor a generous stake so that they can reenter the economy viably, not from the bottom up (vv. 7-10);

—Moses said, if this seems outrageous to you, remember that you were bond-servants in Egypt and you were released by the generous power of Yahweh your redeemer who brought you out (v. 18).

This is the most radical *or* in the Bible, insisting that the economy must be embedded in a neighborly human fabric. Almost all of us choose the *either*, imagining that Joshua’s *or* is not relevant to an urban, post-industrial economy. But there it sits, always a summons, always a reminder, always an invitation. And Joshua had already said, “I tried to talk you out of this *or*; I told you it was too difficult for you.”

2. *Either* let legitimate authority run loose in self-serving acquisitiveness, *or* read Deut. 17:14-20 on monarchy. It is the only law of Moses on kingship. Moses agrees only reluctantly to let Israel have a king; he thought kingship a bad idea and all available models of centralized power were bad. Then he says, but if you must, your king, your Israelite, covenantal, neighborly king shall be different. This king, embedded in covenant, must not accumulate silver or gold or horses or chariots or

wives. Moses knows the three great seductions are money, power, and sex, all of which make community impossible if they are accumulated. And so he offers an *or*. The king, when in office, shall sit all day, every day, reading Torah, meditating day and night on what Yahweh intends, on how covenantal community can curb raw power.

Israel, like every government since, has found it difficult to choose this *or*. The kings of Israel characteristically took the *either* of raw power, as has every kind of power...priests, parents, teachers, deans, bishops, corporate executives. In Israel, the primal example of the power of greed is Solomon, gold, gold, gold, 300 wives, 700 concubines, and later it was said, "Do not be anxious, even Solomon in all his vast royal apparatus was not as well off as a bird."²³ The *or* is about power and governance and greed; in the end, however, it is about anxiety, getting more, keeping more while the land is lost in dread, terror, and devouring.²⁴

3. *Either* it is every man [sic] for himself at the expense of all the others, *or* read Deut. 24:19-22. It is about the triangle of *land-owner*, *land*, and *landless*, and how they will live together. The *either* of Canaanite agriculture is just a "labor pool" of those nameless ones without any leverage or fringe benefits, who work but fall farther and farther behind, until they drop into welfare and then out of welfare into drugs, alcohol, sometimes a threat to us, often an inconvenience, always a nuisance and embarrassment. *Or*, says Moses, in your economic operations, leave enough for *the alien, the widow, the orphan*. Leave the sheaves of wheat when you are "bringing in the sheaves," for *the alien, the widow, the orphan*. When you beat your olive trees, leave enough for *the alien, the widow, the orphan*. When you gather grapes, leave some for *the alien, the widow, the orphan*. The triad is like a mantra for this *or* of covenant because Moses knows that the powerful are in common destiny with the powerless. The haves are linked to the future of the have-nots. Moses had already said, "Same law for citizens and undocumented workers" (Lev. 19:34). Moses knew that in a patriarchal society women without husbands and children without fathers are lost to the community, as bad off as outsiders.

The *or* requires a break with the orthodoxy of individualism. It requires a rejection of the notion of the undeserving poor. It requires a negation of all the pet ideologies whereby unburdened freedom is the capacity to disregard neighbor. And it is all there in the deep command of Yahweh...not socialism, not liberalism, not ideology, just an alternative life.²⁵

Our Christian strategy for disposing of the Mosaic is to dismiss it as legalism, certain we are justified by grace alone, except that this obedience belongs to the center of an alternative community. The *or* is demanding but not obvious. The mantra of this community is endlessly "love God, then love neighbor, neighbor, neighbor."

2. I have characterized Isaiah 40-55 as a primary model of *either/or* testimonial utterance for this special community almost succumbing to Babylon. It was to this little community without confidence and almost without conviction that the poet declared on Yahweh's behalf:

because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life. (Is. 43:4)

II Isaiah, however, only provides the trigger for liturgical, emotional, imaginative, perhaps geographical homecoming. When the Jews did come back to Jerusalem in 537 or 520 or 444, II Isaiah gave little guidance. But then, II Isaiah never comes without III Isaiah. I propose that III Isaiah, Is. 56-66, is the figurative articulation that fleshes out the *either/or* of II Isaiah.²⁶ There is now a great deal of ferment about the book of Isaiah. It is increasingly likely, in scholarly judgment, that the old, deep separation of II and III Isaiah cannot be sustained. And therefore in its canonical shaping, one may see Isaiah 56-66 as an attempt to enact the glorious vision of II Isaiah, but enactments must always come to detail.

1. *Either* be a community of like-minded people who are convinced of their own purity, virtue, orthodoxy, and legitimacy, excluding all others, *or* read Is. 56:3-8. There were all around the edges of restored Judaism inconvenient people who had no claim to purity, virtue, orthodoxy, or legitimacy. There were late-comers, not good Jews with pedigrees, who had joined in, drawn to the faith, perhaps Samaritans or whatever, but surely not “qualified.” Worse than that, there were people with marked, scarred, compromised genitals, people who had sold out to Babylon in order to become willing eunuchs with access to power. Of these Moses long ago in Deut. 23:1 had declared that people with irregular sexual disposition were excluded. It is there in the Torah. All around were hovering people not like us, claiming and pushing and yearning and even believing...What to do?

Says the *or* of III Isaiah, have a generous spirit and a minimum but clear bar of admission. Tilt toward inclusiveness with only two requirements: that they keep covenant, that is submit to the neighborly intention of Yahweh; that they keep sabbath, rest from the madness of production and consumption as a sign of confidence in Yahweh’s governance. That’s all! It is the *or* of inclusiveness, no other pedigree, no sexual transposition, no other purification, an *or* that says the community is not made in the image of our strong points. The community teems with people who score irregularly on every Myers-Briggs notion of how we are and how we ought to be.²⁷

2. *Either* become a punctilious community of religious discipline, engaging in religious scruple with amazing callousness about the real world of human transaction, *or* read Isaiah 58:1-9 and consider an alternative religious discipline of fasting that is not for show or piety or self-congratulations. Practice fast that commits to the neighbor, specifically the neighbor in need, the neighbor boxed in injustice and oppression. Break the vicious cycles of haves and have-nots that produce hungry people and homeless people and naked people, the most elemental signs and gestures of exposure, vulnerability, and degradation, produced by a system that does not notice.

Conventional religious disciplines that feel like virtue are disconnected. The practitioners of such self-congratulation, all the while, exploit and oppress and quarrel; they are uncaring, unthinking, unnoticing. And now the *or* of engagement moves to solidarity with the exposed and the vulnerable. The NRSV says “they are your kin,” but the Hebrew says ‘flesh,’ your own flesh of flesh and bone of bone, self of self. That is who they are.

When the lines of separation between haves and have-nots are broken by true fast, then, says III Isaiah, then, only then, not until then:

*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)

Then, then, then, then...it is the *or* of communion. There is, however, no communion with Yahweh until there is community with neighbor.²⁸

3. *Either* cling to the old status quo of social arrangements and miss God's newness, *or* read Isaiah 65:17-25. The *or* of poetic imagination asserts that the old heaven and the old earth and the old Jerusalem, the old holy city and every old holy city and every old city and every old power arrangement is on the way out and is being displaced. The *or* of world renewal and urban renewal is a fantasy. The community of *or* engages in a strong act of vision: "We have a dream." It is a dream of joy and well-being, a dream in which there are no more cries of distress, no more infant mortality, no more social dislocation when people build houses and lose them by taxation, war, ethnic cleansing, or Olympic committees, where people do not plant gardens and have to move before harvest time. In the world coming there is no more anguish in childbirth. And to top it all, there is reconciliation of creation, lions and lambs, immediate communion with and attentiveness from Yahweh who answers before we call.

The poet offers a breath-taking *or*. He has been radical in chapters 56 on eunuchs and 58 on poor people. But now in chapter 65 he no longer has time for the conventions of reality as he is off on a poetic, evangelical fantasy of what might be and what will be and what is at hand, but not in hand. He imagines, against the lovers of the old city who had felt but not yet noticed the brutal dysfunction of the old city. All will be changed. The poet can scarcely see its shape, but he has no doubt that its coming shape is a healing of all old abrasions and despairs. This *or* will never happen among us while we are bound to what was. Thus the poem is more like a parable than a blueprint, but a parable to be ingested by reforming Judaism, a parable,

about a banquet,
about a rich man and a barn,
about a man with two sons,
about a neighborly foreigner who paid the bills,
about a nagging widow,
about day laborers who get full pay.²⁹

None of that is visible yet. Indeed none of that is possible...yet—except for those who depart the way things are for the One who will make things new.

V.

I am taking an ecclesial agenda because for too long, so it seems to me, christological certitude in the church has much of the time been permitted to silence, trump, and give closure to the Old Testament. I have wanted to suggest that faithful Christian exposition could do otherwise. I regard the preacher's engagement with the Old

Testament as urgent:

- because the *or* of faith, so deeply pondered by ancient Israel, is needed in the face of our dominant *either*;
- because in a technological society, it is mostly left to the preacher, who labors at it locally, to voice the human options in a crisis of flatness;
- because preachers, more than any others, have endless opportunity for the tease of detail whereby the *or* of the gospel may be received and embraced.

The *or* is an impossible possibility. Both Israel and the church have always known that. That is what makes preaching both foolish and urgent.³⁰

Notes

¹ Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) has explored Jewish antecedents to the Christian foundation of "Father-Son."

² For a critical summary of Newbigin's accent on ecclesiology, see George R. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

³ See Walter Brueggemann, "Ecumenism as the Shared Practice of a Peculiar Identity," *Word & World* XVIII (Spring, 1998) 122-35.

⁴ See my discussion, Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997).

⁵ The *either/or* I will exposit is essentially that of the Deuteronomic theology that speaks with conviction that one choice is good and one is bad (see Deut. 30:15=10). That is to say that the *either/or* of the Deuteronomist is completely without the irony of which Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I* (translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 38-39, can write:

Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way. Whether you marry or you do not marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the stupidities of the world, and you will regret it; weep over them, and you will also regret it. Laugh at the stupidities of the world or weep over them, you will regret it either way. Whether you laugh at the stupidities of the world or you weep over them, you will regret it either way. Trust a girl, and you will regret it. Do not trust her, and you will also regret it. Trust a girl or do not trust her, you will regret it either way. Whether you trust a girl or do not trust her, you will regret it either way. Hang yourself, and you will regret it. Do not hang yourself, and you will also regret it. Hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. Whether you hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. This, gentlemen, is the quintessence of all the wisdom of life.

⁶ It is instructive that in both narratives of Abraham (Gen. 15:6) and Moses (Ex. 4:1), the key term is "men=trust." It is "trust" that makes the "or" of Yahweh choosable against the "either" that characteristically seems given and easy to embrace.

⁷ Of that intentional decision, Jacob Neusner, *The Enchantments of Judaism: Rites of Transformation from Birth Through Death* (New York: Basic Books, 1987) 212, writes, "All of us are Jews through the power of our imagination."

⁸ Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 73-74, 96, to be sure, takes chapter 24 to be an early credo and Joshua 21:43-45 to be the culmination of the Hexateuch. The placement of chapter 24, however, is important to the argument concerning its

significance, even if he regards it as early.

⁹ See Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storeyed Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 48-70.

¹⁰ Von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch* 6-7.

¹¹ On narratives producing worlds, see Amos Wilder, "Story and Story-World," *Interpretation* XXXVII (1983), 353-64.

¹² The term "far be it from" is an exceedingly strong expression, suggesting the complete inappropriateness of the action, for such an action would profane and render its subject unworthy. See a usage with reference to Yahweh's own action in Gen. 18:25.

¹³ On this negative command, see the parallel in Gen. 35:1-4. Some scholars, following Albrecht Alt, suggest that a ritual performance is here envisioned whereby the foreign gods are dramatically banished from the community.

¹⁴ The fundamental rhetorical analysis is that of Claus Westermann, "Sprache und Struktur der Prophetie Deuteronomias," *Neudrucke und Berichte aus dem 20. Jahrhundert* ThB 24 Altes Testament (München: Kaiser Verlag, 1964) 92-170.

¹⁵ See Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 117-144.

¹⁶ It is evident that "testimony" is a way to make a claim from "below," when one lacks the tools and authority to make a more established sort of claim for truth. See my comments on Ricoeur and Wiesel in *Theology of the Old Testament*.

¹⁷ See Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism* especially 26-30.

¹⁸ The most fundamental analysis is that of Jacques Ellul, *Technological Society* (New York: Random House, 1967). See more specifically to our point, Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

¹⁹ On the integrity of speech and matching speech to life, see Wendell Berry, *Standing by Words: Essays* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983), 24-63.

²⁰ In recent time, Paul Ricoeur has understood most clearly and most consistently that serious religious language must be spoken in "figure," thus his accent on imagination. Speech that is not in "figure" runs the prompt risk of idolatry, of producing what can be controlled. See the several essays in his book nicely entitled, *Figuring the Sacred: Region, Narrative, and Imagination* edited by Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

²¹ See a summary of this scholarship by Terence E. Fretheim, *Deuteronomistic History*, *Interpreting Biblical Texts*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983).

²² On this pivotal command, see Jeffries M. Hamilton, *Social Justice and Deuteronomy: The Case of Deuteronomy 15*, SBL Dissertation Series 136 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992).

²³ See Walter Brueggemann, "Faith with a Price," *The Other Side* 34/4 (July & August, 1998), 32-35.

²⁴ The "or" of covenantal power is nicely put in the words of Jesus in Mark 10:42-44.

²⁵ On neighborliness extended to outsiders and the weak insiders, see Luke 4:26-27.

²⁶ See Grace I. Emmerson, *Isaiah 56-66*, *Old Testament Guides* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), and Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Community and Message of Isaiah 56-66* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982).

²⁷ The New Testament counterpart to such "foreigners and eunuchs" is perhaps "publicans and sinners," on which see Mark 2:15-17.

²⁸ On neighborly attentiveness as a condition of well-being, see Matt. 25:31-46.

²⁹ Among the most helpful treatments of the parables is John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

³⁰ This is a slightly abbreviated version of my address to the annual meeting of The Academy of Homiletics on December 3, 1998, in Toronto.