

The Family as World-Maker

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The family is, of course, under assault. The structures of social life we have taken for granted are in jeopardy. The issues are expansive and the crisis is more comprehensive than simply the family. A host of anxieties get transferred to the family which properly belong elsewhere. Nonetheless, the family is clearly in crisis as a social structure among us. People rightly ask if biblical faith has resources out of which to make response to this crisis.

The Bible, as nearly as I can determine, contains no single prescription that can be articulated concerning the family. Perhaps if it did, it would not be a single prescription that would be very congenial to the nuclear, capitalist family as is often assumed. In any case I focus here on *one function of the family* which I suggest lies at the heart of our social crisis. I propose that counsel directly out of the Bible for families in crisis consists not in ethical advice (not even advice about sexuality), but in an invitation to *practice a peculiar vocation* which is indispensable for the family and for all healthy social interaction.

That practice of a peculiar vocation can be expressed in several ways. Popularly it has to do with storytelling, with building a "narrative world."¹ Sociologically we may characterize this vocation as the construction of a social reality in which members of the family may live.² Functionally it is creating a communal network of memory and hope in which individual members may locate themselves and discern their identities. But we should note well that such a notion runs deeply counter to the individualism which is valued "on the right" among those who most want the family to recover. Among other things, this view of the family runs counter to the sickness of individualism so pervasive in American ideology.

I

In the world of the Old Testament, we may take the family to include the tribe, clan, father's house, all units of social life that consist partly in blood-ties and partly communities of intentional choice and social strategy.³ In every case the family is a unit which is self-conscious about its life, knowing that work and attention are required to keep the family functioning as a distinct social unit. Such a family knows that it is not an automatic given but only an invitation to construct a social reality of a special kind.

Recent study suggests that "the family" in all these forms functioned in tension with the technically-constructed, bureaucratically-ordered state, city or city state. The state or city tended to be ordered in hierarchal and regimented ways. Its functions included the maintenance of order, the administration of justice, and the supervision of production and distribution of goods. All of that

is, of course, routine, except that such social power claimed and assigned to the city or the state always tends to monopoly; monopoly of force, of goods, of access, so that life is distributed disproportionately, for some at the expense of others. The state or the city as a social force serves to guard and maintain the monopoly.

It may be suggested that what we have called “family”—tribe, clan, father’s house—functioned to provide an alternative vision of reality and to practice an alternative way in the world which did not consent to such monopoly. The more radical form of this notion is that the family provided an alternative way in the world that did not share in the monopolistic tendencies of the dominant structure. The function of the family, in such an understanding, is to nurture folks into an alternative perception of social reality and to practice that social reality in compelling ways. The family then permits and authorizes its members not to participate in the technological enterprise of the large social structure and not to subscribe to its mythology or ideology which justifies and legitimates its technical organizations and policies.⁴

II

I have no wish to draw easy analogies or to make simplistic moves from the Bible to our own situation. Perhaps our situation is much more complex than that reflected in the ancient texts. But for a moment consider the sociological crisis of the family in our culture. The overriding social power of our time is what I call *consumer militarism* which includes the “military-industrial-scientific complex,” but which also is sustained by the media which uncritically fashions images and myths to sustain the dominant value structure. Many of us are domesticated enough so that we understand the family to be a device to nurture folks so that they are suitable and effective participants in the dominant value system. To the extent that the family is to support and enhance the dominant system of technology and ideology, I submit no help can be found in the Bible.

Anyone who has children knows how impressionable they are and is aware of the enormous power of the social realities of the dominant technology and ideology to shape identity, value, world-view in ways that often are not compatible with our Christian notions of social reality. Robert Bellah has suggested that the values of this American public reality are ambiguous, containing both good and bad elements.⁵ While this may be true, I submit that in the long run, the articulation of public values sponsored by the dominant complex is inimical to our faith. The most extreme statement known to me of the values now tempting and challenging us, is *Megatrends*,⁶ a book which purports to be descriptive but in fact is a vehicle for values that are finally anti-human. In those values one will wait a long time to see or notice anything about human hurt or compassion or human hope. By definition, those matters are simply absent in the new projected world that is coming. I propose that the context of the family in our time, not unlike ancient Israel, is cast in a situation where a social world is readily available, a world of docility, obedience, success, and security. If one reads our situation that way, then the first commandment

about “no other gods” is not a discussion about monotheism, but a deep decision about the life-world and social reality to which we give consent and allegiance. I submit that the American family is now facing an issue of the first commandment and is sore pressed with the issue of idolatry as offered in our dominant value system.

The family—which then and now includes tribe, clan, father’s house—is an odd and vulnerable counter-force.⁷ It does not have available impressive modes of power, either to persuade or coerce. What it does have, however, is *day-to-day access at the crucial nurture points of hurt and amazement*. The social location of the family, I suggest, is not in accommodation to the dominant values, not as a bandaid operation to keep people functioning, but as a daily proposal and glimpse of another way to live in the world. It is not then a privatized or domesticated romantic scene, but it is an area in which deliberate and intentional alternatives are articulated and practiced. I propose then that we understand the family, in light of biblical faith, as a counter-culture operation that finally means to subvert the dominant values. If we do not want our children enmeshed in the available values of positivism and technical reason and all they bring with them, then the family is a peculiar chance to construct another world which has more vitality, credibility, and authority in the long run. But it must be a public world, not a private world of escape.

The family, then as now, consists not only in those with blood-ties, but also with ties of intentional choice. That is what the Christian community as family is, a group that has banded together to practice life in an alternative reading.⁸

III

Psalm 78 offers a text for illumination of this notion of the vocation of the family. I suggest it not simply as a text from which to preach, but as a model out of which many other texts can be alternatively understood and interpreted. On this vexed theme, the problem for the preacher is not to find “a good text,” but to get clear on the cultural crisis, the theological resources, and the interpretive possibilities. That is, the issues are hermeneutical. I propose Psalm 78 as a way of thinking about those issues. This Psalm is reckoned along with Psalms 105, 106, 136 as an extended recital of Israel’s core story, growing out of the credo of texts like Deuteronomy 6:20-24, 26:5-9; Joshua 24:1-13.⁹ It offers a basic statement of the essentials of Israel’s memory.

We may focus on verses 1-8 which is a call to participate in the recital of memory. In these verses we do not have the substance of the recital, but the *function*. All we know of the substance in these verses is that it is what

we have heard and known,
that our fathers have told us. (Psalm 78:3)

In verse 7 we are told the positive function of this story.

1) *It is not to forget the works of God*. Indeed the poem is essentially designed to feed and nurture this memory of acts “from the other side.” I submit that the memory of God’s works does two things. First, it keeps in aware-

ness the fact that Israel is not *self-made*, is not a self-starter, cannot be self-sufficient, and finally cannot secure its own existence. This was and is an enormous temptation, especially among the competent and the prosperous who forget the real subject of the active verbs and who imagine that "our might and our power have gotten us this wealth" (Deut. 8:17). The memory asserts that life begins in inscrutable gift and not in an achievement or a contrivance of ours.

Second, the memory of God's work puts an important past behind the present. In so doing, it deabsolutizes and destabilizes the present. Israel can remember when it was not the way it is now. Moreover, Israel can remember the moment when the present appeared unexpectedly out of the past. Where there is no live memory, Israel is tempted to think it has always been the way it is now (Eccles. 1:9-11). If it has always been this way, it must be right and normative. If it is right and normative, then it must be defended at any cost, and certainly not criticized. But with the memory, the present does not need to be so inordinately treasured. The cost of defense can be assessed differently and the present does not need to be beyond criticism. How we engage the present depends largely on what kind of past is set behind it.¹⁰

2) The recital of the memory is so that they should *set their hope in God* (v. 7). It is odd, but true, that our capacity to hope is precisely correlated with our ability to remember. This Psalm knows that. As memory puts space between past and present, so hope lets us imagine a future that is not just more of the present (cf. Heb. 11:1). Notice that in Ecclesiastes 1:9-11, it is the loss of memory that leads to the conclusion that there will be nothing new. But this Psalm which remembers, is filled with hope. That is because Israel takes its memories and understands them as models for what God will characteristically do in time to come. The past does not stay past. As Israel remembers that God divided the sea (v. 13), so Israel hopes that God will in the future deliver. The story is told of the past so that the children will know the future is not closed and fated. It is still open to God's powerful resolve which lies beyond the management of the state or the city or any dominant value structure.

3) The recital is done so that Israel *will keep the commandments*. Obedience is a category of health in Israel. Israel is unambiguous. The sovereign God is one who summons and commands and who will be obeyed. This is not a legalistic set of rules. It is not a petty calculation of virtue. It is rather a recognition that life has normative shape which cannot be nullified or circumvented or mocked.

Children of modernity are wont to imagine that all such notions of accountability have been outgrown and superseded as we have "come of age." But, of course, Israel knows better. And we know better. The empire or the state or the city or consumer militarism is not strong enough or true enough to fashion life apart from God's purposes. Soon or late, destruction comes where there is not ready and willing obedience. Such obedience depends on the story being told and heard.

IV

Thus verse 7 has a vision of how a world could be constructed, or in our terms, how the family can be organized:

Memory which is rooted in God's acts,
Hope which is aimed at God's new future,
Obedience which heeds God's commands.

The family of Israel is a community resolved to practice *memory*, *hope*, and *obedience* of a very particular kind. Now those words may be filled with various contents and that requires much conversation among us. But for now we may stay with the large picture. To understand the urgency of these matters, we have paired each one with its opposite, which likely points to the pathology of our time:

Memory . . . or the embrace of *amnesia*.
Hope . . . or the embrace of *despair*.
Obedience . . . or the anxiety of *autonomy*.

Obviously I have moved away from the text, because these negative terms are not present in the text. But, I submit, they are implicit. They announce what it is that the Psalm and the practice of narrative mean to combat. I cite them because I judge them to be a fair statement of our cultural crisis. They articulate what is at issue in the family, and in our culture more generally. They express the odd values which encourage at the same time passionate individualism and intense conformity and I believe we are a society which tries to have both of these at the same time, surely to our destruction.

The argument I make out of the Psalm is that where the family is not telling the story, we may be sure that the next generation (perhaps we are the next generation) becomes a community of amnesia, despair, and autonomy. Where that prevails, everything is possible, everything except life and health. The text states the negative somewhat differently. Where the stories are not told we will become

a stubborn and rebellious generation,
a generation whose heart was not steadfast
whose spirit was not faithful to God. (Psalm 78:8)

Stubborn/rebellious/not steadfast/not faithful: that is a massive indictment that applies not only to religious matters, but to the basic human acts that are essential to family and to society. The Psalm catalogues some of the specifics:

. . . who did not keep covenant (v. 10),
. . . who forget (v. 11),
. . . who sinned more, rebelling (v. 16),
. . . who did not believe (v. 32),
. . . who did not keep in mind his power or his redemption (v. 42).

The Psalm tells what happens to this community when it no longer tells the story, no longer knows about memory or hope or obedience. It tries to live without reference or identity and becomes dangerously susceptible to every

new ideology. That, I judge, is our situation in which the visible crisis of the family is only a part of a much deeper pathology.

If we translate "rebellion" (v. 8) into amnesia, despair, and autonomy, we are not far from the situation of the contemporary family in our society. We do not refer to immorality, because most of our families are not like that. But it is the case that much family life in our culture has become conformist to the dominant values and dominant rationality without knowing what is happening to us. Rather than maintaining critical distance from the state, the city, the city-state, much family life has become allied with those values. We are, then, in the incongruous situation of embracing as families the very values that finally will destroy the family and prevent the family from doing its humanizing work.

I suggest that the Christian preacher, in recognizing the actual cultural location of the family in American society must consider the family *vis a vis* dominant values which are geared to consumerism and militarism which are expressed in conformist ways and which finally will rob us of our humanness. It is clear that if one thinks this way, then the old quarrels about being liberals or conservatives become irrelevant to our real problem.

To the extent that the American family has amnesia,¹¹ it will conform, because only memory permits critical distance. But when the peculiar memory of hurt and amazement (which is our birthrite) is silenced, we will opt for the "big story" told in the empire of success and victory, e.g., a white male reading of American history, the one predominantly taught in our public schools.

To the extent that the American family is in despair, which means having no hope (because there is no memory) we will cling desperately to the way things are. The measure of our despair in public life is that we can think of no viable alternative to militarism. No doubt an index of more intimate despair is the practice of wife abuse and child abuse, actions of desperate people who hope for nothing and so engage in destruction and violence. It could be that military adventurism is simply a more respectable form of violence, permitted to those who would never stoop to overt family abuse.

To the extent that the American family is a practitioner of autonomy, serious covenanting communities become impossible. The notion that the self is the unit of meaning, that we are free to do what we will, that we need answer to none, that our neighbor is an option and not a given, all of this creates an illusion of freedom which in fact is a seductive form of conformity.

My purpose in considering Psalm 78 is both to analyze the pathology that is among us and to suggest a need for a response out of the tradition. I suggest that the family is under assault, not from the dangers of drugs and obvious forms of immorality (though these are true as well as obvious), but the family is under assault from social ideologies and values that are destructive, so dangerous and destructive because they appear to be compatible with our faith. The first task of the preacher is to sort out the ways in which these values challenge and distort our families. Only then is alternative practice in the family or in the church possible.

To combat these temptations of amnesia, despair, and autonomy; to foster memory, hope and obedience; there is entrusted only one primary factor . . . *the story*.

This is a very odd, very special, very specific story that belongs peculiarly to us. We must not be too impressed with "storytelling" in general, but only with our particular story. To tell this story is not simply a gesture for entertainment or nostalgia. It is rather a firm, polemical argument about the shape of our world and our place in it. The Psalm builds to a stunning conclusion. After long verses on Israel, it arrives at the judgment (vv. 67-68) that God has at long last *rejected* this people and *chosen* an alternative. This is not your normal romantic theology which is benign and romantic and even-handed. This story shapes reality to say that life in the world, life with God, consists in hard choices and decisions. History is a painful process of *rejecting and choosing*. Such a notion prevents every excessive certitude. It requires that the danger, openness, and dynamic of covenant be taken into account. It requires us to recognize that God is not predictable, controlled, and placed in a box. In this Psalm, *the reject/choose* notion benefits the David family recently come to power. But elsewhere, as in the poetry of Amos (Amos 3:2), it is announced that the chosen people are now the judged people. It is the same freedom of God which amazes and places in jeopardy.

Preaching about the family has nothing to do with maudlin romanticism, or becoming nostalgic. Rather it is an occasion for reflection on the tough issues. Unless the tough issues are joined explicitly and intentionally, Israel always finds itself yet again enmeshed in the dominant values. And that is how it is in the Christian congregation in America. We are deeply enmeshed. We need help sorting out. But the sorting out must not come from fear over some immediate ethical issue. It must come from underneath, where the basic elements of our faith have a chance to present an alternative. The Christian preacher is not engaged in aiding and comforting and relieving our anxiety about the jeopardy we are in. It is rather the task of preaching to help us understand the real jeopardy and to act in liberated and faithful ways. The story give energy and authority in the face of every controlling system. We may be at a point when the Christian family takes with joy its location of world-making that counters the dominant world that will bring us only death. The family, taken publicly, has a chance for life.

NOTES

¹ On the notion of "narrative world," of stories making worlds, see the superb statement of Amos Wilder, "Story and Story-World," *Interpretation* 37 (1983) 353-64.

² For the clearest statement of the social work of constructing reality, see Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1967) and Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., Inc. 1966). Note especially their references to Alfred Schutz.

³ See the careful analysis of Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979) 237-341. Note his general rubric of family as "protective association."

⁴ On the capacity of a unit like the family to dissent from the "Great Story," see the general analysis of Gary A. Herion, "The Social Organization of Tradition in Monarchic Judah," (Unpub-

lished Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1982) 51 63 and *passim*. On the same perspective applied to the contemporary family, see Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) 155 174.

⁵ Bellah has explored this two sided character of American public reality in various ways and places. See especially his programmatic essay, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* (Winter, 1967), and *The Broken Covenant* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

⁶ Cf. John Naisbitt, *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives* (New York: Warner Books, 1982). My concern is not the *data* Naisbitt presents, but his *casting* of it, which in fact screens out all human questions.

⁷ Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979) 79 83, has shrewdly understood this text as an effort of one generation to transmit its counter cultural perspective to the next generation. He suggests, moreover, that the text hints of the resistance of the new generation to appropriating this alternative perspective.

⁸ John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), has most poignantly discerned the practical dimensions of this alternative reading, as it relates to concrete social practice.

⁹ The basic study of this series of texts is Gerhard von Rad, "The Form Critical Problem of the Hexateuch," *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966) 1 78. See the powerful derivative statement of Walter Harrelson, "Life, Faith and the Emergence of Tradition," in *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, ed. by Douglas A. Knight (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977) 11 31, with his stress on the "core" tradition. It is that core that is most crucial for the development and maintenance of the family as an alternative reading of reality. I am grateful to Dr. Dorothy Bass for having forcefully called my attention to Psalm 78 in this connection.

¹⁰ See the analysis of Gary A. Herion, "The Role of Historical Narrative in Biblical Thought: The Tendencies Underlying Old Testament Historiography," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 21 (1981) 25 57, on the very different uses that can be made of memory. The relation between memory and current social perception is clearly a reciprocal one.

¹¹ On the cultural power of amnesia, see especially the work of Robert J. Lifton. His entire corpus is concerned with this problem, but see especially, *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979) in which he maps the ways in which amnesia is an escape from the historical realities past and present.