

Scriptural Strategies Against Exclusionary Absolutism

God has placed the US church in a situation of enormous risk. It is a risk brought on mostly because of policies and attitudes rooted in a conviction of exceptionalism, but nonetheless a risk that is deep and broad, and generative of enormous anxiety. The by-products of that systemic anxiety include, on the one hand, denial among those who do not want to face the risk and, on the other hand, despair among those who see the risk but can imagine no way beyond it. The two by-products of anxiety, denial and despair, have resulted in a variety of strategies aimed at exclusionary absolutism, based on the fearful assumption that elimination of the “other” will ease the anxiety and bring well-being and security.

I have no doubt that the matrix of anxiety, denial, despair, and exclusionary absolutism is a dense and complex social phenomenon well beyond my understanding. But since religion is much at play in this matrix and since it impinges upon the life and faith and missional energy of the church, all of us must consider it well. Thus I consider the self-selection into Red and Blue communities of housing, jobs, schools, and churches to be a matter of enormous concern. Even a scriptural exegete must wonder about the issue, even though scriptural exegesis is far from the center of our most common concerns.

I understand, of course, that there is no easy interface between the contemporary “Big Sort” and scripture, but will seek to make a useful connection through this thesis:¹ The temptation to exclusionary absolutism is an old and deep and recurring seduction in the community of faith. But one can also detect scriptural strategies--by which I mean interpretive strategies undertaken by those who put the Bible together—that seek to resist off such exclusionary absolutism that is characteristically rooted in anxiety. I will use my time and energy to consider three such interpretive strategies, with the suggestion that these same strategies are

now available in our interpretive practices and may be useful in present circumstance for the sustenance and maintenance of church unity and church fidelity.

I.

The first such strategy I mention is the recognition that nearly to the bottom of the tradition interpretation was conducted in pluralistic modes that refused any simple settlement in a single unitary interpretive voice. I say “nearly to the bottom of the tradition,” because at the very bottom there was and singular unity. In the Old Testament, as von Rad has made clear, that singular unity attested, “He brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm and brought us into a good land.”² In the New Testament Church, as C. H. Dodd among other has seen, that singular unity affirmed, “He was crucified according to scripture and raised, according to scripture on the third day.”³ Or as we say,

Christ has died,

Christ is risen,

Christ will come again.

At bottom unity. But as soon as the community, Israel or the church, has uttered an interpretive syllable about any of these mantras, the tradition has gone pluralistic. That is why I say, “nearly to the bottom.”

That pluralism in the Old Testament has been featured and articulated in a way familiar to you in the so-called “Documentary Hypothesis,” that is, JEDP. I assume that most bishops do not sit around and think about JEDP; but the terms, Germanic in articulation, reflect an interpretive strategy that resists exclusionary absolutism. When most of us went to seminary, the matter of JEDP was used to explain and identify the evolutionary development of Israelite religion from primitive to sophisticated, from polytheism to monotheism, from magic to ethics. J,

we said, was early, polytheistic, and magical, D was sophisticated, monotheistic, and ethical. I would not take time with this if that were still a viable hypothesis. Current scholarship, however, takes the sources, JEDP, to be contemporary with each other and not arranged in a sequence, deeply rooted competing interpretive trajectories, all of which are early, all of which are late, all of which vie for air time as the true rendering of the bottom-line credo. Particular attention is now given to D and P, and I will expost these, when taken together, as a textual strategy for pluralism that resists exclusionary absolutism.

At Sinai all of Israel remembered Exodus, all of Israel received the decalogue, and all of Israel swore allegiance to the covenant. Within a nano-second of Sinai, however, Israel discovered that the Sinai data permitted and required interpretation; as soon as Israel took the first step into interpretation Israel found itself in a pluralistic practice of how to render, perceive, and teach Sinai. That competitive pluralism over time organized itself into two powerful interpretive trajectories, the Priestly and the Deuteronomic. We can imagine that both of these interpretive offers were loud, credible, and insistent. The Primary Narrative of Israel's memory from Genesis through II Kings, the narrative from creation to exile, divides into two sections, divided at the Jordan River and the entry into the land of promise.

It is now agreed that the Priestly tradition, very old in Israel and made contemporary in sixth century exile, dominates the first four books of Genesis through Numbers. It is this tradition that authorized the ritual practices of sabbath and circumcision. And as you know, it is this Priestly tradition that offers the holiness accent of Exodus and Numbers and most especially Leviticus. It was a deep conviction of the priests that Israel must create a holy environment if it wanted to host the holiness of God and therefore the accent is on purity and cleanness.

Conversely what is unclean and impure constitutes an affrontive abomination to God and will drive out the holy God who will not dwell among an unholy people.

Thus the many repetitions of Leviticus are an attempt to organize the ritual life of Israel—and derivatively the civic life of Israel—as a suitable locus for God’s holiness. As you know, the long (tedious) section of text in Exodus 25-40 concerns the construction of a priestly tabernacle where the glory of God may bivouac. That narrative moves to the culmination of Moses’ work in Exodus 40, the final chapter, where it is happily affirmed:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (Ex 40:34-35).

This text is followed in Leviticus 1-7 with an inventory of proper sacrifices that pertain to every dimension of relationship with God, in Leviticus 8-10 with a concern for proper priesthood, in Leviticus 16 with the proper disposal of sin in Yom Kippur, and in Leviticus 18-26 which scholars term “The Holiness Code” with regulations for every aspect of life. As you also know, Leviticus 18-20 has received most recent attention because chapters 18 and 20 concern sexuality and the two chapters sandwich the commandment in chapter 19 to love neighbor as self.

Mary Douglas, the most prominent Leviticus scholar of present time (an anthropologist and not a biblical exegete herself) has written of “Purity and Danger” in which she proposes that purity is an agenda to which a community gravitates when it perceives itself under threat.⁴ It is possible, so the priests contended, to organize a communal practice according to purity that will be a fitting habitat for God’s abiding holy presence.

The second part of the Primary Narrative of Genesis-II Kings is dominated in Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings by what scholars call “Deuteronomic

theology,” that is, interpretation that is rooted in the Book of Deuteronomy. The Book of Deuteronomy, unlike the Priestly materials I have cited, does not claim to be God’s word, but is, rather, Moses’ exegetical commentary on Sinai. In the Book of Deuteronomy, the ten commandments are reiterated in chapter 5. And then, after some hortatory sermons by Moses, the decalogue is explicated in the legal corpus of Deuteronomy 12-25. It is thought by some scholars that the central teaching of the Deuteronomic commandments is “the year of release” in Deuteronomy 15:1-18. That commandment provides that at the end of every seven years debts against poor people must be cancelled. That is, the poor are released from debt in order that they may viably participate in the economy and in order that the community does not form a permanent underclass. That extended commandment is of interest to us:

- because Moses says that you must always do the release because there will always be poor people: “The poor you have always with us” (v. 11);
- because if you do this, there need be no poor people in the community (v. 4);
- because the commandment utilizes five infinitive absolutes, the most intense verbal form, suggesting the intensity of the commandment (vv. 4, 5, 8, 10), and
- because the commandment warns against tight-fisted, hard-heartedness toward the poor, evidence of resistance to the commandment (v. 7).

But the point is this. Deuteronomy is concerned with economic justice of a distributive sort, so that communal goods may be made available to all members of the community, most especially including the poor.

That focus of interpretation of Sinai receives extended exposition in Deuteronomy. In chapter 14, for example, the tithe is designed as a festival for the poor:

Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; The Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake (14:28-29; see 16:11, 14).

A variety of miscellaneous commandments in Deuteronomy are designed to protect the poor, culminating in chapter 24 with attention to the “triad of the vulnerable (widows, orphans, sojourners) with reference to the three money crops (wine, grain, and olive oil):

When you reap your harvest in the field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this (24:19-22).

In sum the Deuteronomic tradition concerns economic justice, so that the economy is subordinated to and made to serve the infrastructure of the neighborhood. Obedience to Sinai has to do with a counter-cultural practice of economic justice.

Now I have taken this long on these two parts of JEDP in order to make a simple but defining point concerning our topic. Nearly to the bottom of the tradition there is interpretive pluralism in the tradition that moves in the direction of *sacerdotal purity or societal justice*, together with all of the derivatives that these two commitments evoke in terms of liturgy, ethics, and public policy. The reason these twinned moral trajectories may interest us is that they readily

translate into our own preferred categories of conservative and liberal (or progressive), into a tradition of equilibrium and a tradition of transformation, or in present company, into Red and Blue. As the canon of scripture was finally formulated, these traditions divided between themselves the Primary Narrative of Genesis-II Kings that we may reckon as the oldest and most authoritative text of Israel and derivatively of the church. I wish to draw five conclusions about this interpretive pluralism that may continue to instruct us:

First, both of these traditions are there in the biblical text. Both are “biblical.” And both are accorded high and binding authority.

Second, neither of these trajectories was able to win or to crowd the other out. Neither was granted ultimate authority, either because the canon makers exercised wisdom, or because neither could, as we say in sports, “finish.” Because both are there, this means that neither one can claim high moral or theological ground over the other, because both are kept in the final form of the text, in a penultimate status.

Third, both traditions contain enough of the other accent that it represents a tip of the hat, a recognition, or even a concession to the validity of the other trajectory (James in Acts 15). Thus the holiness tradition of the priestly trajectory includes the remarkable text of the Jubilee year in Leviticus 25. The festival is called “holy to you” (v. 123), and so fits the bill of holiness. But it is odd in the Priestly account and concerns the political economy.

Conversely, Deuteronomy 14 offers a full inventory of clean and unclean animals, befitting a priestly agenda:

You may eat any clean birds. But these are the ones that you shall not eat: the eagle, the vulture, the osprey, the buzzard, the kite, of any kind; every raven of any kind; the ostrich, the nighthawk, the sea gull, the hawk, of any kind; the little owl and the great

owl, the water hen and the desert owl, the carrion vulture and cormorant, the stork, the heron, of any kind, the hoopoe and the bat. And all winged insects are unclean for you; they shall not be eaten. You may eat any clean winged creature. (14:11-20).

And then comes the conclusion:

For you are a people holy to the Lord your God (14:21b).

Again the accent is odd, against the grain of the tradition in which it is situated.

Fourth, each of these trajectories issues in a strong hope-filled prophetic articulation. On the one hand Ezekiel, a child of the Priestly tradition, describes the way in which a polluted temple required the departure of YHWH's holiness (Ezek. 8-10). In the end, with careful delineation of priestly authority, Ezekiel can anticipate the full return of the glory to the temple, so that the book of Ezekiel ends with the new name for Jerusalem, "YHWH is there" (48:35). On the other hand, Jeremiah, child of Deuteronomy, can discern the destruction of Jerusalem due to the exploitation of the widow, orphan, and sojourner. And eventually Jeremiah can envision a new covenant in which all members of Israel keep the Torah of Deuteronomy that is written on their hearts:

I will put my Torah within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people (Jer. 31:33).

It is instructive that these two sons of the canon variously hope, each in his own trajectory, that the future will be a renewed temple with indwelling presence, or the future will be a renewed community of neighborly justice. Both are there, and neither Jeremiah nor Ezekiel was resolved to excommunicate the other.

Fifth, the teachers of the church, enthralled by the classical tradition of theology or by the bewitching power of systemic theology, have in my judgment ill-served the church by teaching

that biblical faith is a seamless package of coherent truth. It is, in my judgment, much more faithful and much more pastorally helpful it is to exhibit the Bible in its disputatious pluralism, in order to show that no trajectory has the power or the authority to be the ultimate. The core claim at bottom is a simple one. But it evokes and requires and permits and authorizes interpretation that is defyingly pluralistic. The household of faith with its Red and Blue contentions is faithful to the P and D trajectories. The exclusionary absolutism of either Red or Blue is a betrayal of the very structure of biblical faith. Such absolutism is to fall into the Enlightenment trap of drawing singular conclusions rather than engaging in dialogic processes. And if church people are seduced into such absolutism, it is in some large measure because they have been taught that by the church teachers in their refusal to do the hard work of living with penultimate judgments that are always a membrane away from the bottom of the singular claim. The pastoral recognition that goes with this awareness is that human persons, like the Bible, each and all, are conundrums of dispute that refuse final settlement.

II.

The second scriptural strategy against exclusionary absolutism that I suggest and review is that the preferred mode of interpretation in our time and place is not *the Babylonian exile* but more properly the *Persian period of flexible negotiation*. I pay particular attention to this because the mode of the “Persian period” is a relative innovation in scholarship.⁵ When most of us were in seminary, the Persian period was not even on the syllabus, so little was known about it.

The Babylonian period and its theological categories have been clear and well-known and compelling among us for a long time. It was a rendering of the history of Jerusalem generated by a small group of elite fanatics who were deported to Babylon, who seethed in displacement, who yearned for return to Jerusalem, and who became the moving force in the

formation of Judaism. This group of fanatics, like every group of fanatics, took its own experience of deportation (exile) and their passionate hope of return, and imposed that experience as the governing truth for all Jews, whether they had been deported or not, whether they had ever left Jerusalem or not.

This model of faith depends upon absolute clarity vis a vis Babylon without any compromise. The clarity is a) that Babylon is an unmitigated evil, and b) Israel is the chosen, forgiven people who are the unique carrier of God's way in the world. This contrast between *good forgiven Israel* and *evil, condemned Babylon* leads to a radical either/or that invites courage and daring hope, and a sense of blessed exceptionalism that requires risk and defiance.

This model of *exile and restoration*, imposed on the raggedness of lived experience as defining ideology, is best known in the poetry of II Isaiah, partly mediated through Handel's *Messiah*. In this rendering, Babylon is rejected as an arrogant, self-serving imperial power whose haughtiness, the characteristic haughtiness of a superpower, is critiqued and rejected:

You said, "I shall be mistress forever" (Isa. 47:7).

...who say in your heart,

"I am, and there is no one besides me;

I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children" (47:8).

You said, "No one sees me....

I am, and there is no one besides me" (47:10).

Alternatively Israel is the blessed recipient of God's salvation oracles that give assurance of God's rescuing attentiveness:

But you, Israel, my servant,

Jacob whom I have chosen,

The offspring of Abraham, my friend;
You whom I took from the ends of the earth,
And called from its farthest corners,
saying to you, “You are my servant,
I have chosen you and not cast you off”;
Do not fear, for I am with you,
Do not be afraid, for I am our God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand (Is 41:8-10).
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine (Is. 43:1).

This beloved Israel, moreover, is called upon to learn “the arts of departure.” The departure from a rejected empire permits a self-discernment as YHWH’s holy people:

Depart, depart, go out from there!
Touch no unclean thing;
Go out from the midst of it, purify yourselves,
You who carry the vessels of the Lord,
For you shall not go out in haste,
And you shall not go out in flight;
For the lord will go before you,
And the God of Israel will be your rear guard (52:11-12).
For you shall go out in joy,
And be led back peace;

The mountains and the hills before you
 Shall burst into song,
 And all trees of the field shall clap their hands (Is. 55:12).

What strikes one in the poetry is the certitude, singularity of purpose, and a radical either/or. This rhetoric invited the community to a sturdy ideology of “us” against the world, and the conviction that all of God’s future promises are designed precisely for this singular community. The point is to be distinguished from the world, in order to receive a special future from God.

It is of course a leap from that poetic vision to Red and Blue. But I think not too much. I believe that the Red and Blue passions in our society carry with them an inchoate sense of self-congratulations as a carrier of what is true and faithful and best, and a corresponding sense that the way to remain unsullied is to have no serious engagement with “the other.” In such a horizon, the “other,” Red or Blue, is not perceived as a part of the community of chosen destiny, but is perceived as the imperial “other” that offers a distorted view of reality that is to be avoided.

While the other party may not be demonized that clearly, at the very least it has nothing worthwhile to contribute and therefore no attention need be paid. The “Babylonian model” leads to a virtue of being “put upon” by the other party, so Jew as victim of empire, Red or Blue as victim of Red or Blue. I think this model of self-congratulations is so pervasive that we do not reflect on it. I suggest it is a model designed out of self-interest that has been made culturally and theologically normative among us.

In place of that Babylonian model that became normative for Judaism, I suggest that we pay attention to the long Persian period of Jewish faith that extended from Cyrus in 540 to Alexander the Great in 333, thus a period of 200 years. Unlike the Babylonian model of *exile*

and restoration, the Persian period yielded a practice of *accommodation and resistance* that required uncommon agility, not unlike the Fiddler on the Roof. According to this model, the church must nurture people in agility, persons who have no intransigent point but are capable of responding imaginatively to new circumstance and challenge without digging in anywhere too deeply.

Three matters are clear about the Persian period that contrasts with the Babylonian:

1. It was a very long period that required Jews to have patience and staying power, without any restoration as it had been envisioned by the poetry. This is in contrast to the Babylonian period, according to the ideological model, that was short and then over.

2. Whatever may have been the historical reality (and scholars dispute the point), in Jewish articulation the Persian government was benign in its treatment of Jews, utilizing an imperial policy of supporting local traditions, including the local Jewish tradition of “The God of Heaven.” According to the data, Persia permitted the Jews to return home, funded much of the restoration of the city, and paid for the newly built temple in Jerusalem. As a result, there is in the Old Testament no prophetic oracle that condemns Persia, while we have many oracles that condemn Babylon.

3. At the same time, we know that Persia taxed the Jewish colony heavily, so much so that Ezra could say in his prayer:

Here we are, slaves to this day—slaves in the land that you gave to our ancestors to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts. Its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They have power also over our bodies and over our livestock at their pleasure, and we are I great distress (Neh. 9:36-37).

Such a prayer warns us not to take too seriously the portrayal of Persia as benign.

4. Given that demanding imperial-colonial relationship, Persia could be perceived as the rescuer of Israel that was helplessly held by Babylon. At the end of II Chronicles 36, the final verses of the Hebrew Bible, Cyrus is remembered as the one who issued the edict permitting Jews to go back home. And II Isaiah ups the rhetorical ante in 45:1 by declaring that Cyrus is YHWH's anointed, that is, his Messiah, that is, his Christ. The functions that had pertained to David have been transferred to the Gentile deliverer.

There is evidence that some Babylonian Jews resisted deliverance by a Gentile, perhaps in a defiant posture of wanting to wait for a Jewish deliverer. But the poet (or better YHWH) will have none of that resistance to a Gentile deliverer:

Woe to you who strive with your Maker,
 earthen vessels with the potter!
 Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, "What are you making"?
 or "Your work has no handles"?
 Woe to anyone who says to a father,
 "What are you begetting?"
 Or to a woman,
 "With what are you in labor?"
 Thus say the Lord,
 The holy One of Israel, and its Maker:
 "Will you question me about my children,
 Or command me concerning the work of my hands?" (Is. 45:9-11).

All of these data concerning the Persian empire have suggested to scholars that the Persian period is in fact the generative, creative era of ancient Israel, leading to the formation of

the canon of the Hebrew Bible and the formative decisions concerning the future of Judaism. For our purposes what strikes one is that the old Babylonian model of *exile and restoration* accompanied by *defiance and departure* is no longer the order of the day. If there is to be a restoration, it will be funded and authorized by the Persians. Clearly defiance is inappropriate in such a circumstance; and departure of a geographical kind is irrelevant, for wherever Jews might go, including to Jerusalem, they were still in Persia. Thus the exile-restoration model of a radical either/or had to be displaced by a model of both/and, both Jews and empire, both Jerusalem and Persia, and I would extrapolate, both Red and Blue, because a Babylonian either/or is incongruent with social, ecclesial reality.

The new model in the quasi-benign imperial context is one of accommodation and resistance that required immense agility, more agility than a simplistic either/or required or permitted. Great accommodation was required to the unyielding facts on the ground. And sufficient resistance was undertaken to sustain a distinct Jewish self-awareness, or what Michael Fishbane has recently termed “mindfulness” in a society committed to mindlessness.⁶ It is in the Persian period, most likely, that Judaism developed the disciplines of Jewishness that fostered and sustained a distinct identity, but they are disciplines that did not preclude a great deal of accommodation.⁷

It is the judgment of many scholars that the appropriate mode of Jewishness in the Persian period is not the utterance of defiant oracles, but rather the telling of narratives that evidence agile negotiation in a social environment that did not permit the throwing down of a defiant gauntlet.⁸ Here I will consider three such narratives that bespeak accommodation and resistance rather than exile and restoration.

1. There is a propensity among scholars now to date much of the Old Testament to the Persian period. Among such texts that are increasingly situated in the Persian period is the *Joseph narrative* of Genesis 37-50. As you know, this story turns on the capacity of Joseph to interpret the dream of pharaoh after the imperial intelligence community had failed to read the intelligence of the dream adequately. Pharaoh, in Jewish imagination, is the cipher for every imperial power, no doubt including Persia. The Persians have power, but cannot decode hidden revelation. As you know, Joseph reads the dream that is a nightmare of coming scarcity. There is surely irony in the dream: the one with the most dreams of lacking what is needed! With the completion of the dream interpretation, Joseph, in anticipation of Richard Cheney, nominates himself to preside over imperial food policy:

Now therefore let Pharaoh select a man who is discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt (Gen. 41:33).

That much we all know.

But we most often do not read on to chapter 47 where Joseph, as food czar, implements a policy of imperial monopoly, systematically taking from the peasant labor force their money, their cattle, and their land, and eventually their bodies as they are reduced to slavery:

So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh. All the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe upon them; and the land became Pharaoh's. As for the people, he made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other... They said, "You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be slaves to pharaoh" (47:20-1, 25).

The antidote to anticipated scarcity is state monopoly that culminates in slavery. And because of deep anxiety about hunger, the slaves express gratitude for their new status as slaves.

The entire process of economic centralization is managed by a son of Jacob. Most remarkably, the narrative utters not a word of criticism against Joseph for his exploitative policy. Recent commentators, following von Rad, have focused on the claim that Joseph fed his brothers (Gen. 45:1-8). If, however, we look at the narrative in larger scope, here is a Persian period Jewish story featuring a wise Jew who fully accommodated himself to imperial reality and gave his life and career over to resolving imperial anxiety about scarcity. It is no wonder that Leon Kass, in his recent commentary, speaks of the complete “Egyptianization” of Joseph, the full accommodation of Jewishness to imperial requirement.⁹ Given all of that, Joseph is still reckoned in the narrative as a full-fledged practitioner of the covenant who is an adequate carrier of Jewish hopes for the future. The Joseph narrative lives at her extreme “accommodation” end of the spectrum of the accommodation-resistance model of faith.

2. Perhaps at the other extreme is the *story of Esther* who manages her Persian access point to the great benefit of the Jews. There is no doubt that the Esther narrative is Persian in setting, set in the world of Ahasuerus, perhaps Artaxerxes. As the story goes, Esther becomes the Persian queen, because she is “fair and beautiful” and has a powerful political uncle, Mordecai. As she becomes queen, we are told:

Esther did not reveal her people or kindred, for Mordecai had charged her not to tell (2:10).

In the plot of the book, Haman, a Persian political operator, is planning to get the Persian authorities to eliminate all Jews. It is only by the intervention of Mordecai that his plot is foiled. But his effectiveness depends upon the cooperation of Esther; she must run the risk of exposing her own Jewishness and thereby risk her status in the empire. Mordecai wants her to go public:

Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this (4:13-14).

Esther is persuaded. At great personal risk, she makes her Jewish identity visible and is prepared for what that may cost her:

Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish." (4:16).

This paragraph is the turning point in the narrative wherein we arrive at a new interface of Persia and Judaism, of empire and distinct identity. Esther had fully accommodated herself to the empire. Her new resolve does not quite amount to resistance, except that her articulation of Jewish identity now makes her an awkwardness in the empire, for what can empire do with such distinct identity? From that decision the plot unfolds. Haman, who had thought to execute the Jews, is now himself executed. Esther's action has caused the empire to mobilize on behalf of Jews. Now it is not Jews in service to the empire (as with Joseph); now it is empire in the service of Jews. The narrative ends with a Persian permit that the Jews are free to kill their enemies with imperial approval, an act that eventuates in the Festival of Purim, the great festival of Jewish self-assertion (9:18-32).

It is clear that Esther embodies a model very different from that of Joseph. Here there is less accommodation and much more self-assertion. That perhaps amounts to resistance, if we take Jewish self-declaration as itself an act of resistance against imperial reductionism.

3. The third character I mention is *Daniel* who has much in common with Joseph. While the narrative situates him vis a vis Nebuchadnezzar, it is likely a Persian period piece, though you may know that much historical criticism links the narrative to the Maccabean crisis of the second century. In a series of narratives, Daniel operates vis a vis the empire:

-In chapter 2, Daniel, not unlike Joseph, interprets the dream for Nebuchadnezzar. It is a dream of a succession of kingdoms each of which is in turn destroyed. As with Joseph, the imperial sages could not read the dream; but here Daniel intervenes to save the imperial intelligence community that the king wanted to execute for its failure.

The narrative culminates with Nebuchadnezzar's recognition of Daniel and Daniel's Jewish God:

Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell on his face, worshiped Daniel, and commanded that a grain offering and incense be offered to him. The king said to Daniel, "Truly your God is God of gods an Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery!" (Dan 2:46-47).

And beyond that theological affirmation, Daniel is a huge political success in the empire:

Then the king promoted Daniel, giving him many great gifts, and made him ruler of the whole province of Babylon and chief perfect over all the wise men of Babylon. Daniel made a request of the king, and he appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the affairs of the province of Babylon. But Daniele remained at the king's court (Dan 2:48-49).

The narrative exhibits the way in which a Jew uses his peculiar Jewish gifts of interpretation both to gain promotion in the empire and to serve the benefit of the empire. In this narrative, there is no conflict between Jewish advancement and imperial well-being.

-The narrative in Daniel 3, by contrast, features strong resistance to empire. Here Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, refuse to bow down to imperial icons and rely upon deliverance from their own God. They are, as a result of such resistance, thrown into the fiery furnace, but come out unharmed. The fact that they are unharmed by the worst that the empire can think to do evokes from Nebuchadnezzar another theological affirmation:

Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him. They disobeyed the king's command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own (3:28).

And again the theological affirmation is followed by political gains for the Jewish people:

Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that utters blasphemy against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins; for there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way. Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon (3:29-30).

Here it is resistance that is the order of the day; but it is resistance that does not attack the empire. The outcome is a positive one because their resistance is linked to the reality of the God they serve.

-In chapter 4, Daniel is again a dream interpreter. Here, after he has interpreted the dream, he dares to give advice to Nebuchadnezzar, advice that is quintessentially Jewish that derives precisely from Sinai and the prophetic tradition:

Therefore, O king, may my counsel be acceptable to you: Atone for your sins with righteousness, and your iniquities with mercy to the oppressed, so that your prosperity may be prolonged (4:27).

This utterance is a remarkable intrusion of Jewish ethical conviction into a self-serving empire that had little ethical sensibility.

The narrative unfolds so that Nebuchadnezzar suffers because of his arrogance. But when his “reason returned” (v. 34), it issues in a doxology to the king of heaven. Indeed in the horizon of the narrative, imperial sanity is recognition of the God whom the Jews attest. The great emperor is in a posture of self-yielding praise:

Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven,
 For all his works are truth,
 And his ways are justice,
 And he is able to bring low
 Those who walk in pride (4:37).

The Daniel narratives show a Jew in the empire with freedom, courage, and imagination. If we ask about the source of such freedom, courage, and imagination, we may turn back to Daniel 1, the opening narrative wherein Daniel is a recruit for civil service in the empire. This narrative offers the grounding for all that follows. For it is reported that Daniel refused the rich food of the imperial training table, and negotiated permission to live on a Jewish diet of vegetables and water. The narrator reports:

But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine; so he asked the palace master to allow him not to defile himself (Dan 1:8).

The key word is “defile.” He would not compromise his Jewishness for the sake of empire. He maintained his Jewish identity through Jewish disciplines that the empire barely permitted. It is this refusal, I submit, that subsequently gave Daniel ground for effective life in the empire. That initial narrative on Daniel concludes in this way:

And among them all, none was found to compare with Daniel, Hananiah, Michael, and Azariah; therefore they were stationed in the king's court. In every matter of wisdom and understanding concerning which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom. And Daniel continued there until the first year of King Cyrus. (1:19-21).

The final note makes a connection to the Persian, Cyrus.

I suggest that the character of Daniel is not as accommodationist as Joseph, and not as militant as Esther, and so perhaps occupies a median position. But if we take the three Persian narratives all together, what we have are rich models for faithful survival and effectiveness in the empire, a faithfulness and effectiveness that requires enormous agility. For our purposes the point to accent in this Persian context is that there is no radical either/or, no strident polemic, no attempt to excommunicate others who operate differently, but a recognition of a common danger and a common possibility that pertains to the entire community. It is my thought that such a model of accommodation and resistance in place of exile-restoration goes a long way beyond our usual internecine combat that is here rendered passé. The true situation of Christians in the US is in a dance of agility that is not propelled by passionate ideology but by a steadfast resolve about identity and a shared awareness of the vulnerability of faith in the midst of the hegemony of empire.

III.

The third scriptural strategy against exclusionary absolutism that I consider is a shift from *prophetic proclamation* to *scribal interpretation*, a shift I have laid out in a recent article in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*.¹⁰ Of course all of us value prophetic ministry and prophetic

preaching, and the most zealous of the Red and the most vigorous of the Blue will most fervently engage in prophetic rhetoric concerning their grasp of truth against the enemies of that truth.

Prophetic rhetoric aims to confront and divide and sort out. Prophetic rhetoric is on the one hand vigorous in its articulation of what scholars call “speeches of judgment” that consist in an indictment for violation of Torah and a sentence of divine judgment to come. The package of indictment and sentence is rooted in old covenantal traditions of divine commandment and divine sanctions (curses). We are of course familiar with such prophetic confrontations:

- Nathan to David;
- Elijah to Ahab;
- Isaiah to Ahaz;
- Amos to Amaziah;
- Jeremiah to Jehoiachim.

Every one of these utterers against the “cows of Bashan” knew that big trouble was coming for the self-indulgent who were not “vexed over the ruin of Jacob.” And no doubt that capacity for righteous indignation has continued with the Pope keeping the emperor standing in the snow, and Luther, “Hier ich stehe,” and Martin Luther King before the sheriffs. I do not for an instant denigrate such moral passion.

Conversely, prophetic promises are large and clear concerning homecoming and new covenant and new Jerusalem and new temple and new heaven and new earth, and even passing allusion to new life after death. The promissory passion of the prophetic tradition matches the moral conviction. And the Red and Blue communities can continue that vigor, Reds most often about sexuality and Blues most often about economics. In the Old Testament such rhetoric required a king and an urban elite as counter-point and target. When Israel ended that political

arrangement, prophesy tended to dry up. There is no doubt that as Israel moved into displaced Judaism the initiative for leadership passed from the prophets to the scribes who were allied with the wisdom teachers, and whose principle task was the continued interpretation of the textual tradition that operated, if not authoritatively, at least as a consensus funding for imagination. My judgment is that the vigor of the prophetic becomes less viable as Israel was *decentered* from power and as circumstance of *marginality* made it unseemly and impractical for Israelites (now Jews) to use their fragile energy excommunicating each other when the community could ill afford to lose any.¹¹

Mutatis mutandis, I propose that our situation in the US church is not unlike that, decentered from power and situated in marginality. For me it follows, by way of analogue, that it is unseemly and impractical for the church to use its fragile energy excommunicating each other when the community can ill afford to lose any. That shift means that internal disputes over moral questions are dealt with less intensely, and it means that all parties are aware that present interpretations are not final interpretations. The classic example among us of interpretation being excessively final is the vigor mobilized in the defense of slavery on a biblical basis. My own seminary, Columbia Seminary, and its great theologian Thornwell used immense energy on that project, with as much moral fervor as one could mount on any issue. And of course that seminary and its constituency are still processing the awareness that it was wrong. The scribes, unlike the prophets, were aware of the elusiveness of faithful interpretation and the precarious notion of truth, especially when it is inescapably allied with economic interest and a hunger for power. I do not suppose that I would persuade any to abandon prophetic vigor; my purpose is to consider scribal activity enough to suggest it as a viable alternative. Scribes are fundamentally scroll people who understand that the normative scrolls require on-going work and continue to be a gift

that keeps on giving.¹² The scribes are characteristically neither “strict constructionists” nor “originalists,” but are concerned to let the text have its fresh contemporary say. I will mention four texts:

1. It is possible that the tradition of Deuteronomy is scribal, as Moshe Weinfeld has proposed, though not provably so.¹³ In any case, Deuteronomy is a revision, a re-reading of Sinai, in the interest of contemporaneity:

Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today (Deut. 5:3).

The dynamic of the tradition of Deuteronomy (unlike that of the Priestly tradition) is a dynamism that can be traced through the whole text, as each new generation had to do it all over, albeit informed by their predecessors.

2. In Jeremiah 36, we have the remarkable narrative account of how the scroll of Jeremiah—the Book of Jeremiah—came into existence. Jeremiah dictates it to Baruch the scribe, who then reads it in public and was summoned to answer for the scroll in official councils. It is Baruch the scribe and not Jeremiah the prophet who answers for the scroll. I make only two observations about the narrative. First, the scroll was read to King Jehoiachim who ostentatiously cut it up with a pen knife and threw it, a little at a time, into the fireplace. This is the first instance we have of the shredding of documents. Power wants to eliminate the scroll. Second, after the shredding we are told that Jeremiah redictated the scroll to the scribe. And the narrative ends with these ominous words: “Many similar words were added to them” (36:32). The scroll is not disposed of. The scroll is not fixed and final. It is open and elastic, and it is the work of scribes to see that “many other words” might be added. Many scholars believe that this narrative maneuver from Jeremiah to Baruch constitutes a huge historical turn in which the impetus for

religious leadership is passed from prophet to scribe, and it is the task of the scribe to keep the scroll contemporary through the on-going exercise of imagination.

3. The second scribe I mention is Ezra who, as you know, is reckoned by the rabbis to be second only to Moses in the tradition. David Halivni, moreover, has proposed that the text of Moses was “damaged” and it was the work of Ezra to heal and restore the scroll to its full, generative future.¹⁴ In Nehemiah 8 we are offered a narrative that many scholars, following von Rad, regard as the founding moment of Judaism as the scribe, Ezra, convenes the entire community before the Water Gate in Jerusalem, and read to them the Book of the Law, the Scroll of the Torah. The remarkable description of this public act is that with the Levites, Ezra,

helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places.

So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading (Neh. 8:7-8).

This is a remarkable hermeneutical act, perhaps the origin of the sermon, certainly an exercise in exegesis. They read—in order to understand—with interpretation—to give sense—so that they understood. The refounding of the restored community depends upon exegetical interpretation which, perforce, went beyond old memory to let it be contemporary. This public reading that produced weeping (v.09) and then joy (v. 12) led to a celebration of the Festival of Booths, thus word that led to sacrament. The narrative ends this way:

And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the book of the law of God. (Neh. 8:18).

It is all about the text, its reading, its hearing, its exegesis, its interpretation, its openness to the contemporary. Notice how scribal this is. Prophets do not propound texts. They offer oracles that sort out in original ways. But textual interpretation summons the whole community—all who

could understand—to receive fresh identity from fresh hearing. Judaism characteristically pushes behind the prophetic oracle to Torah narrative and commandments. I think this is exactly what is now required in a church where prophetic oracles are mostly uttered and heard by the already convinced in the particular sect that holds the truth.

4. It is a quick stretch from Baruch via Ezra to Jesus. My fourth scribal text is the parabolic collection that Jesus gives to his disciples in Matthew 13, a text that is peculiar to Matthew. In this sequence there is,

- the parable of weeds and what (vv. 24-30),
- the mustard seed (vv. 31-32),
- yeast (v. 33),
- sowing seed (vv. 36-43),
- hidden treasure (v. 44),
- great pearl (vv. 45-46),
- fish in a net (vv. 47-50).

When Jesus finished his sequence of parables, he says to the disciples, “Have you understood all of this?” And they answer, “Yes.” And then he says,

Therefore every scribe that has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old (Matt. 13:52).

Clearly the scribes, often linked to the Pharisees, have gotten a mostly bad press. But here it is positive. These are peculiar scribes “trained for the kingdom of heaven,” that is, committed to the Jesus project. These parables are the curriculum for such scribes. When we take the sum of these parables that are bracketed by the “wheat and tares” and “fish in a net”, the conclusion is that the wheat and tares must be left to grow together until the final harvest and the good fish and bad

will be sorted when the angels come and separate out the evil. There will be a Big Sort. But it is not given over to human agents. Human agents are to let it be, confident that God and God's angels are adequate deciders.

In the meantime, free of obligation to sort, true scribes have a different function, to bring out of the treasure "what is old and what is new." Old in context is the faith of Israel. What is new is the coming of the kingdom in Jesus. And from that model we may say what is old is the reliable tradition of the church; what is new is where the spirit leads beyond the settled tradition. Scribes are situated exactly at the hinge of the old and the new. There is no clear guide about old and new; but it clearly requires freedom and fidelity and agility to keep the action going between old and new. That of course is what the rabbis always do. Of course that is what every lively parish always does. Of course that is what everyone in psycho-therapy always does. Of course that is what we do all the time in our personal relationships, not settled in what is old, not easy with what is new, but brooding in negotiation about old and new, repeated formulae and fresh insight, and awaiting the Big Sort that will come later. I suspect the good scribe would say that the work of conservatives is to treasure what has been settled; the work of liberals is to make new connections. We are all in a negotiation together and we are all willing to leave the Big Sort to God and to God's angels.

We are able to see Jesus the scribe practicing exactly such a repertoire in his old/new in the Sermon on the Mount. Of the verse about the old and new in the treasure, Daniel Harrington adds, in his exposition:

The message of patient tolerance and leaving to God the settling of scores is timely today also. For a world in which so many conflicts occur on the basis of religion, race, ethnic identity, and so forth, this is sound advice.¹⁵

IV.

I am no sociologist, only an exegete. But I believe we can see in scripture itself practices that are pertinent to the Big Sort among us:

-A recognition that *the foundational tradition is pluralistic*, that neither the voice of justice nor the voice of purity can easily claim high moral ground;

-A location in the Persian context of *accommodation and resistance* with a practice of agility, a rejection of a Babylonian model with its strident either/or;

-A *practice of scribal interpretation* that refuses the bold invectives and bold promises of the prophetic, but continues to watch for newness in the old text that is given in imagination.

The sum of these strategies, I believe, is to recognize that our work is characteristically penultimate, well short of any absolute. It is my judgment that the church, in all quarters, must repent of its lust for the absolute. But surely the Rabbis, and the Church Fathers after them, understood that there are no final interpretations. And surely we have learned in the twentieth century that final interpretations are a dangerous step along the way to the Final Solution. In my Church, the United Church of Christ, we have now adopted the slogan, "God is still speaking," which means in that liberal context, God has something new to say about sexuality. The logo for that slogan is a comma, suggesting that after the received truth of scripture there is not a period, but a comma.

But my church is tempted to disregard everything in front of the comma. The task for Red and Blue in the church, conservatives and liberals, is to recognize that because the spirit is on the move, we must pay attention to both sides of the comma, not just what is old and not just what is new. That is what it means to be a scribe trained for the kingdom. Those who cherish only what is old or only what is new are doing something other than serving the kingdom. Of

course Anglicans have long known that a proper check on absoluteness is the message Oliver Cromwell sent to parliament, “I beseech you by the bowels of Christ to think that you may be mistaken.” It is the hard-hearted refusal of the church to entertain that thought that leads to an Easy Sort. The gospel summons to more openness, thickness, and complexity than that.¹⁶

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Notes

1. I have made my argument in what follows, with an engagement with Bill Bishop,

The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like Minded America is Tearing Us Apart Boston: Houghtlin Mifflin, 2008). Bishop observes the pattern of the way in which US residents are choosing to live and work and study and worship with like-minded people, Red or Blue. Thus the term “Big Sort” refers to this self-selection process that divides our society.

2. Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 3-8.

3. C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (New York: Harper & Brothers, n.d.) 7-35.

4. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), *idem.*, *Implicit Meanings; Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975) 249-275, 276-318. See the comments on her work as it

pertains to Leviticus by Lester L. Grabbe, *Leviticus* (Old Testament Guides; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) 56-62.

5. On recent scholarship of the period, the best access is through Jon L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), *idem.*, ed., *Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period* (Semeia Studies 50; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007). See also Daniel L. Smith, *The Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile* (Bloomington: Meyer Stone, 1989), and Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

6. Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) 82-84 and *passim*.

7. The practice of Jewishness amid the empire is not unlike the 'hidden transcripts' identified by James C. Scott. See Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), *idem.*, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). Such disciplines deliberately stay beneath the radar of the empire.

8. See the pioneering work of W. L. Humphreys, "A Lifestyle for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel," *JBL* 92 (1973) 211-223, followed by Smith, *The Religion of the Landless* 153-178, and Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow* 221-232.

9. Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: Free Press, 2003) 569 and *passim*.

10. Walter Brueggemann, "Four Proclamatory Confrontations in Scribal Refraction," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56/4 (2003) 404-426.

11. I do not suggest that there was no zeal to judge other members of the community. Psalm 1 is commonly taken to be a late Psalm that reflects internal dispute in the community concerning the real Torah keepers (the righteous), and the “wicked” who did not measure up. I do suggest, however, that such a propensity did not halt the more generous way in which the canon was shaped.

12. On the defining role of the scribes, see Philip R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of Hebrew Scriptures* ((Library of Ancient Israel; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998) and Karel Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

13. Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

14. David Weiss Halivni, *Revelation Restored: Divine Writ and Critical Responses* (Boulder: Westview Press/Perseus, 1997), and Peter Ochs, “Talmudic Scholarship as Textual Reasoning: Halivni’s Pragmatic Historiography,” *Textual Reasonings: Jewish Philosophy and Text Study at the End of the Twentieth Century* ed. by Peter Ochs and Nancy Levene (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2002) 120-143. There is no agreement about the nature or extent of the scroll that Ezra read, though it is not impossible that it was the full form of the Pentateuch. Indeed, Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987) suggests that Ezra authored the Pentateuch, a view informed by rabbinic scholarship.

15. Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Sacra Pagina; Collegeville: Liturgical Press 2007) 210.

16. It is clear that there is no single motif of the famous “Christ and Culture” model that is adequate for such circumstance. Indeed the agility required precludes a settlement in any single

mode of “Christ and Culture.” I am glad to mention two studies that pertain to the line of my argument in this paper. See Donn Morgan, *Fighting with the Bible: Why Scripture Divides Us and How It Can Bring Us Together* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007), and Brad Hirschfield, *You Don’t Have to be Wrong for Me to be Right: Finding Faith Without Fanaticism* (New York: Crown, 2007)