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# Old Testament Contributions to Ecclesiology: Engaging and Extending the Insights of John Howard Yoder

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OLD TESTAMENT CONTRIBUTIONS TO ECCLESIOLOGY:

ENGAGING AND EXTENDING THE INSIGHTS OF JOHN HOWARD YODER


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ABSTRACT

Conspicuously absent from ecclesiological literature is a volume dedicated exclusively to assessing the Old Testament's relevance to ecclesiology. With only a few exceptions, scant use is made of the Old Testament in ecclesiological primers and that use tends to be highly selective and often decontextualized. This dissertation argues that in-depth engagement of the Old Testament furnishes a helpful context for ecclesiological reflection and that John Howard Yoder's canonical-directional approach to Scripture exemplifies such engagement. Though Yoder did not dedicate a treatise exclusively to the Old Testament's ecclesiological relevance, his numerous scattered essays on this topic evince a rich and coherent Old Testament narration that scholars have not sufficiently engaged and which pays significant ecclesial dividends.

For Yoder, God did not begin shaping the life of the Church only in the New Testament; rather, the formation of Abraham's descendants as God's chosen people constitutes the fundamental starting point of the Church. This does not, however, mean that every social form that Israel takes in the Old Testament is normative for the Church. Yoder argues that in Christ God reveals and confirms the direction he was going in the Old Testament and provides the requisite criteria for evaluating Israel's social legacy. Importantly for Yoder, God did not wait until Jesus to correct Israel's missteps, but began doing so with the sixth-century diaspora and the transformation of Israel into a transterritorial nation. Consequently, important features of the Church's social shape and structure were largely in place before Jesus was born.

If Yoder is right, the Old Testament must no longer be ignored in ecclesiological reflection. His narration is not, however, without flaws. Though Yoder's canonical-directional approach to Scripture makes valuable contributions to ecclesiology, his reading of key events in Israel's history needs to be modified and gaps need to be filled. This dissertation brings together Yoder's full Old Testament narration, engages its weaknesses, and strengthens it by filling gaps and furnishing needed correctives. It closes by demonstrating that the concept of a priestly kingdom serves as a fitting ecclesial metaphor that marshals the contributions of the full canonical witness for ecclesiology.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

**The Eclipse of the Old Testament in Ecclesiology**

Investigations into ecclesiology are conducted from a variety of angles as evident

in a brief sampling of ecclesiological works from the past few decades. Avery Dulles

uses a multiplicity of models to illuminate important aspects of ecclesial life. Paul S.

Minear makes similar use of biblical images. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen takes an ecumenical

approach that accentuates the unique emphases of different confessional traditions.

Miroslav Volf roots ecclesiology in God's triune nature. Letty M. Russell takes a feminist

approach. G. C. Berkouwer frames his discussion according to the classic creedal marks.

Historical and exegetical approaches also abound, as evident in the work of Haight and

Ferguson. All of these approaches yield important insights into the Church's nature and

mission.[1] Yet conspicuously absent from the increasingly diverse landscape of

ecclesiological literature is a monograph dedicated exclusively to assessing the Old

Testament's relevance to ecclesiology. Not only is such a focused work lacking, but most

systematic ecclesial studies fail to dedicate even one full chapter to the Old Testament's

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[1]Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, expanded ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1987); Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960); Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002); Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993); G. C. Berkouwer, *The Church*, Studies in Dogmatics, trans. James E. Davison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976); S. J. Haight, *Historical Theology*, vol. 1 of *Christian Community in History* (New York: Continuum, 2004); and Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

unique contributions. Instead, scant use is made of the Old Testament, and even that use tends to be highly selective and often decontextualized.[2]

The problem that this dissertation addresses is the dearth of ecclesial literature that sufficiently engages the Old Testament's contributions to ecclesial analysis.[3] Yet the Old Testament poses multiple questions that ecclesial thinkers must ask if they are to develop a well-rounded biblical ecclesiology—questions like: Does the Church learn anything from Israel's constitution in Torah as a loose federation of relatively equal tribes? Why did God begin forming Israel as a palestinocentric people? Was the monarchy part of God's design for his people or a needless detour? When God scattered the Israelites in the sixth century, was this merely punitive or was God beginning to re-organize them in a transterritorial manner? Why, when the Israelites return from exile,

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[2] This is not to say that the Old Testament has been altogether ignored in ecclesiological reflection. Plenty of texts engage the Old Testament's contributions to specific ecclesial topics, whether social ethics or various ecclesial practices (e.g., Oliver O'Donovan, *Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996]; and Peter Leithart, *Priesthood of the Plebs: A Theology of Baptism* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003]). Similarly, many theologians have dedicated portions of their books to the Church's relation to Israel (e.g., Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* [New York: Harper & Row, 1977], 136-149), and others have written full monographs on this topic (e.g., Scott Bader-Saye, *Church and Israel after Christendom: The Politics of Election*, Radical Traditions [Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999]). Yet such works are more concerned with Jewish-Christian relations than they are with what the Church can learn about its own life by a close analysis of Old Testament Israel's life. What is lacking is a formal ecclesiological study that focuses at length on the unique contributions of the Old Testament as a whole to the overall shape of the Church's corporate life.

[3] I write this essay primarily as a Christian in conversation with other Christians about how we may better appropriate the full canonical witness to Jesus into our ecclesiologies. The full canonical witness, from the perspective of this essay, includes what Christians commonly refer to as the "Old Testament" and the "New Testament." For good reasons, contemporary Jews do not refer to the "Old Testament" as such, and Christians involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue rightly strive to identify more neutral terminology for the Scriptures that Jews and Christians share, whether "First Testament" or "Hebrew Scriptures." These terms, however, raise problems of their own since "First" seems to presuppose at least a "Second" and not all of the Old Testament is written in Hebrew (especially for those Christians who include the Apocrypha). Since the approach to the Old Testament offered in this essay is overtly Christian, I will continue to use the more common Christian appellations Old and New Testament. It will be clear throughout the argument of this essay, however, that the "Old" in Old Testament should not be interpreted to mean outdated or somehow superseded and that the Old Testament has much to teach Christians about ecclesial life without denying its abiding relevance for contemporary Jews.

does God not restore them to their former glory as a fully independent nation with a king and glorious temple as several Old Testament prophets seem to have anticipated? What do we make of the fact that those Jews who chose not to return from exile formed communities throughout the world whose life together appears remarkably similar to that of post-Pentecost churches?[4]

These questions about the shifting shape of Israel's life in the Old Testament raise additional questions about how the Church might learn from Israel: Are all social-political formations found in the Old Testament equally valid for their particular situations, or does Scripture offer criteria that help us distinguish between appropriate contextualization and inappropriate deviation? Are certain social-political formations in Israel's experience more appropriate for ecclesial imitation than others? Does the inauguration of God's Kingdom through Jesus impact the relevance of Israel's prior social-political makeup? Does Jesus begin something so new and incommensurable so as to render comparison between Israel and the Church futile? Or does Jesus reveal what God has willed for his people all along, thereby furnishing criteria for evaluating prior social-political manifestations? Depending on how one answers such questions, the Old Testament may have much to say about the Church's life together. Mennonite theologian

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[4] Several of the questions in this paragraph require terminological clarification. Throughout this essay, I most often refer to God's people *in the Old Testament* as "Israel" or "the Israelites." The term "Jew" is appropriate in the latter part of the Old Testament narrative, perhaps as early as the divided kingdom when those outside of Israel began referring to God's people as Jews and the term gained traction. By the first century C. E., Jewish identity was relatively fluid with the result that it is necessary to talk about many Judaisms, whose adherents deemed themselves "Jews." Some of these Jews followed Jesus and may be called Christians or messianic Jews; others did not. Yet acknowledging Jesus as Messiah, at that time, did not challenge their status as Jews. In the second century, however, Rabbinic Judaism began rising in prominence as normative Judaism, over against Christianity. It is beyond the scope of this essay to determine exactly when Rabbinic Judaism commanded the majority assent of Jewry and when messianic Jews were excluded (or excluded themselves) from normative Judaism. When I speak of contemporary Jews or Jewish-Christian dialogue, however, I am speaking about the majority stream of Judaism flowing from Rabbinic Judaism.

John Howard Yoder brings such questions to the forefront in fresh ways that require careful analysis, evaluation, and extension. Such is the task of this essay.

## Thesis

The thesis of this essay is that depth-level engagement of the Old Testament contributes to a robust telling of the biblical story and furnishes a helpful context for ecclesiological reflection. George Lindbeck has issued a clarion call for such engagement that has hardly been heeded.[5] Alongside Lindbeck, Walter Brueggemann and Gerhard Lohfink are notable exceptions, though none of them engages the important work of Yoder in this area. Yoder provides a way of narrating the Old Testament story that pays significant ecclesial dividends. For Yoder, God did not begin shaping the life of the Church only in the New Testament. Rather, all of God's workings to form Israel as his chosen people inform our understanding of God's will for the Church. This does not mean, however, that every social form that Israel takes in the Old Testament is normative for the Church. Yoder believed that Christ reveals to us the direction God was going in the Old Testament and thus provides valuable criteria for evaluating Israel's social legacy. Yet, importantly for Yoder, God did not wait until Jesus to correct Israel's missteps. He began doing so with the Babylonian Diaspora, which transformed his people into a transterritorial "nation." As a result, the basic shape of the Church's life was largely in place long before Jesus was born.[6]

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[5] Lindbeck, "The Church," in *Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. James J. Buckley, Radical Traditions (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 145-168.

[6] Yoder spells out this narration most concisely in "See How They Go with Their Face to the Sun," an essay presented at Loyola Marymount University in 1995 and now published in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* [hereafter *JCSR*], eds. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 183-202. Yoder began working on this theme earlier, however, as evident in "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," a lecture first delivered at Bethel College (1982) and later published in *JCSR*, 69-89.

If Yoder is right, the Old Testament must no longer be ignored in ecclesiological reflection. Yoder's narration is not, however, without flaws. Though Yoder's canonical-directional approach to Scripture makes valuable contributions to ecclesiology, his reading of key events in Israel's history needs to be modified and many gaps need to be filled. Ecclesiological deliberation would thus benefit from a careful analysis of Yoder's Old Testament project and a more complete narration of the Old Testament story that builds off of Yoder's key insights and draws the appropriate ecclesiological implications.

## Recent Trends and Important Developments

As discussed above, there are notable exceptions to the overall pattern of ecclesial neglect of the Old Testament. To begin with, two positive trends have framed ecclesial discussions in such a way as to draw further attention to the Old Testament's relevance: works that accentuate the Church's relation to Israel and works that locate the Church in God's Mission. Though these trends have paved the way for greater attention to the Old Testament, they do not in and of themselves constitute the kind of focused, depth-level biblical analysis for which I am advocating. Also noteworthy are three scholars who have exemplified serious ecclesial engagement of the Old Testament in their respective contexts, namely, George Lindbeck, Walter Brueggemann, and Gerhard Lohfink. Though these scholars have significantly advanced the conversation, they have not engaged important conversation partners, like John Howard Yoder and the Free Church tradition, thereby leaving much work to be done.

I begin this chapter by briefly introducing the two aforementioned trends and illustrating each with a cursory analysis of how one representative scholar indicates the relevance of the Old Testament for ecclesiology. After doing so, I take a closer look at

the contributions of Lindbeck, Brueggemann, and Lohfink. I summarize the basic

argument of a work written by each of them that has significantly advanced

ecclesiological reflection and I highlight gaps in each of them that my engagement and

revision of Yoder's project helps fill.

Two Promising Trends

*Works Accentuating the Church's Relation to Israel*

Post-Holocaust reflection has produced a surge in works that focus on the

importance of non-believing Israel for the Church's self-understanding.[7] Scholars have

lamented not only the Church's complicity in the terrible persecutions that befell the

Jewish people, but also the supersessionist theological postures that made such atrocities

possible and blinded the Church to important Israel-like aspects of its own identity and

mission.[8] Taking Israel as a people more seriously also means taking the Old Testament

seriously as the canonical account of Israel's formation as a people.

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[7] E.g., Donald G. Bloesch, "All Israel Will Be Saved: Supersessionism and the Biblical Witness," *Interpretation* 43, no. 2 (Apr 1989): 130-142; Mary C. Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Understanding* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000); Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds. *Jews and Christians: People of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001); David E. Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); Tikva Frymer-Kensky, et al., eds., *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000); Tod Linafelt, ed. *A Shadow of Glory: Reading the New Testament after the Holocaust* (New York: Routledge, 2002); R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); Marc H. Tanenbaum, et al., eds. *Evangelicals and Jews in an Age of Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984); Clark M. Williamson, *A Guest in the House of Israel: Post-Holocaust Church Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993). These works represent a wide variety of responses to Jewish-Christian relations. E.g., *Christianity in Jewish Terms* is written by a combination of Jewish and Christian scholars, the former outnumbering the latter; Bloesch represents a more evangelical approach; and Carroll and Boys argue for extensive revision of the Christian position with relation to Judaism.

[8] Supersessionism is the notion that the Church has replaced Israel as God's chosen people to mediate God's blessing to the world. Mary C. Boys presents a typology of Christian approaches to Judaism ranging from revolutionary replacement, to evolutionary replacement, to evolutionary progress, to complementarity. Boys advocates the latter (*Has God Only One Blessing*, 219-220). Boys borrows this typology from Laurence Hull Stookey, "Marcion, Typology, and Lectionary," *Worship* 66 (1992): 251-62, esp. 256-57.

Scott Bader-Saye's recent work, *Church and Israel after Christendom*, begins to unpack the implications of these developments for ecclesiology.[9] Bader-Saye is concerned that too many churches are reducing themselves to mere voluntary associations that are unduly influenced by the shifting whims of the consuming public. His solution is "a return to Israel, into whose election the Church has been grafted."[10] This causes him to reflect on the reality of the Jews-alongside-the-Church, who are a perpetual reminder that the Church's identity is not something Christians choose but something for which they have been chosen by God. Unfortunately for our purposes, Bader-Saye does not pay sufficient attention to the Jews-long-before-us in the Old Testament. Though he marshals the Old Testament Scriptures to demonstrate Israel's election and compare it to the Church's election, his use of the Old Testament is not significantly instructive beyond that.

Bader-Saye is only one of many theologians who have embraced the relevance of Israel for ecclesiology.[11] Unfortunately, this growing and commendable concern for Jewish-Christian relations and its bearing on ecclesiology rarely translates into robust analysis of how God was using Israel in the Old Testament. Rather, first-century Judaisms and beyond often become the focus, and New Testament passages like Romans 9-11 provide the lion's share of exegetical fodder. Not only is the Old Testament seldom

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[9] Scott Bader-Saye, *Church and Israel after Christendom: The Politics of Election*, Radical Traditions (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999).

[10] Bader-Saye, *Church and Israel after Christendom*, 25.

[11] See also Hans Küng, *The Church*, trans. Ray and Rosaleen Ockenden (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 107-149; Walter C. Kaiser, "Israel as the People of God," in *The People of God: Essays on the Believers' Church*, eds. Paul Basden and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991), 99-108; and Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

consulted but, when it is, the emphasis is on passages that affirm God's unconditional and irrevocable election of Israel. Old Testament Israel is not truly considered a model from which the Church can learn. Rather, Israel is deemed a distinct and separate people group with whom the Church must learn to live respectfully.

It is worth noting, however, that both Lindbeck and Yoder carry out their ecclesial engagements of the Old Testament in the context of deep concern for how Christians and Jews may cooperate and learn from one another in our own day.[12] So whereas Jewish-Christian conversations have not always led to robust ecclesial investigations of the Old Testament, they have contributed significantly to the kind of ecumenical atmosphere that makes such reflection both feasible and advisable.

*Works Locating the Church in God's Mission*

Another important theological trend that has encouraged ecclesial appropriation of the Old Testament is represented by the Missional Church movement.[13] This loose federation of like-minded theologians and practitioners who are associated with the Gospel and Our Culture Network rightly locates ecclesiology in God's mission to the

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[12] Cf. Lindbeck, "Confession and Community: An Israel-like View of the Church," in *Church in a Postliberal Age*, 1-9; and Yoder, *JCSR*, 30-35.

[13] The most important and foundational ecclesial primer representing this movement is Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Since the publication of this work, Missional Church literature has increased considerably. A few additional representative works include Craig Van Gelder, ed., *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); *The Missional Church and Denominations: Helping Congregations Develop a Missional Identity* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2008); Howard Snyder, *Community of the King*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004); and Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003).

world.[14] This means going back to the very origins of God's mission, which is rooted in creation and tied to the calling of Abraham. In addition to numerous practical ecclesiology primers, this movement has produced a welcome stream of literature familiarizing readers with the full scope of the Bible story.[15]

With such a focus, one would expect steady engagement of the Old Testament for practical ecclesiology, but one does not find it. Even though telling the whole story and locating the Church in that story is crucial for missional thinkers, the ecclesial primers they have produced do not bring the specific rhythms of Israel's life into conversation with those of the Church. Rather, the Bible message is often reduced to a general scheme such as Creation, Fall, Christ, and Consummation. In such cases, what is most noted about the Old Testament is that human sin created adverse conditions in this world that required God to intervene and set it aright beginning with Abraham. Occasionally, missional thinkers briefly acknowledge that God was using Israel to address these conditions—but more often than not, they rush to the New Testament and learn little from Israel's concrete experience as God's people.

Craig Van Gelder's *Essence of the Church* represents the limited role that the Old Testament often plays in Missional Church primers.[16] In this book, Van Gelder argues in good missional fashion that the gospel revolves around the reign of God that began in

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[14] For a brief introduction to the Gospel and Our Church Network and the Missional Church movement, see Michael W. Goheen, "The Missional Church: Ecclesial Discussions in the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America," *Missiology* 30, no. 4 (Oct 2002): 279-290.

[15] E.g., Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004); and Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

[16] Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

Jesus. God's mission from the beginning of creation was to introduce the reality of this reign and it is thus the Church's purpose to both proclaim and demonstrate it to the world. The Old Testament serves two purposes in Van Gelder's schema. First, it provides necessary background information for understanding what God's reign encompasses. By studying what creation was like in the very beginning (the Garden of Eden) and what the prophets anticipated it would be like in the very end (the Day of the Lord), we learn about the nature of God's kingdom. Second, it contains the first two of the following four key components of the Bible story: Creation (Gen 1-2), Sin/Fall (Gen 3), Redemption/Re-creation (Gospels), and Consummation (Rev 21-22).[17] Even though the Old Testament does not itself record the redemption brought by Christ, it anticipates that redemption and prepares for it in important ways. The formation of God's people through Abraham's descendants was a vital component. They were chosen to become the people through whom God would take his redemption to the entire world. After God's reign began in Christ, this people became the demonstration plot of God's redemption.[18] Through the Church's life together, the world should see God's reign at work.

Unfortunately, Van Gelder says little about Israel's nature and role prior to the work of Christ. He acknowledges that the Israelites anticipated Christ's reign and would later become its representatives, but ignores the time in-between. Van Gelder fails to show that their concrete life together prior to Christ teaches us anything about the Church's life together after Christ. In essence, Van Gelder's narration hardly needs Israel.

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[17] Van Gelder, *Essence of the Church*, 88-96. Though Van Gelder titles this section "Creation, Re-Creation, and Consummation," as he goes on to explain the key events, the Fall is just as significant an event and thus a key contribution that the Old Testament makes.

[18] Cf. Van Gelder, *Essence of the Church*, 99-100.

Once the Bible story is framed as Creation, Fall, Recreation, and Consummation, Israel is

relegated to the role of a passive bystander, regretting the past and awaiting the future.[19]

One gets a sense that missional thinkers like Van Gelder know that more work

needs to be done in the Old Testament and that Israel's life is closely connected to the

Church's life, but they have yet to dedicate much space to such reflection. This

deficiency is beginning to be addressed in Missional Church works that seek to recount

the full scope of the biblical story.[20] As they zoom in on the Old Testament portion of

their narrations, they emphasize how God was already using Israel's life together in

concrete ways to accomplish his mission. These more complete narrations, however, have

not made a significant impact on practical ecclesiology primers. Such integration is a

necessary next step in the Missional Church movement, and I suspect it would be warmly

welcomed. This is precisely the kind of integration that we see in the following three

scholars, none of whom is formally associated with the Missional Church movement.

<div align="center">Three Exemplary Scholars</div>

*George Lindbeck*

> *The vision of the Church which we shall explore is that of the messianic pilgrim people of God typologically shaped by Israel's story…. This is the way of viewing the Church which currently has the greatest prima facie claim to ecumenical catholicity.[21]*

Over two decades ago, Lutheran theologian and ecumenist George Lindbeck

wrote an essay advocating an Israel-like view of the Church and thus a more holistic

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[19] For a helpful critique of the limitations and liabilities of this four-fold schema, see Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, 25-56.

[20] E.g., Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*; and Wright, *The Mission of God*.

[21] Lindbeck, *Church in a Postliberal Age*, 146-147.

approach to incorporating the Old Testament into ecclesiology. In this essay, he insists

that the way forward for ecumenical ecclesiology is that all thinkers take seriously that

the Church is a culmination of Israel's story, that is, a "messianic pilgrim people of God

typologically shaped by Israel's story."[22] This means that all that applies to Israel in the

Old Testament also applies to the Church—except where differences are explicit—and

that various ecclesial lessons may be learned from Israel.[23] Lindbeck furnishes four

guidelines for reading New Testament references to the Church that illustrate how and

why the Old Testament's portrait of Israel is so important.[24]

1.  From the beginning, communal self-understanding was narratively shaped, which means, for Lindbeck, that the Church is a concrete group of people, not invisible or transempirical.
2.  Israel's history was the early Church's only story, since the early Christians only had the Hebrew Scriptures, which they read in light of Christ.
3.  Early Christians appropriated the whole of Israel's story, not just their favorite parts, and they did so as a continuation of Israel, not as its fulfillment, since only Christ fulfills Israel.
4.  Israel and the Church were one people for the early Christians, which means that continuity between the story and the identity of the people was unbroken and that the inclusion of uncircumcised Gentiles into the covenant constituted not the formation of a different people, but an enlargement of the old. In short, Pentecost began an era of new possibilities for God's people, not a new Israel.

Lindbeck then draws practical ecclesial conclusions from his reading of the Old

Testament, which he places under two headings. The first is "Identity and Mission."[25]

Lindbeck begins by noting that, in continuity with Israel's story, God continues to choose

and guide a people to be a sign and witness to who he is by its life together. This means

that, despite changes in form that are demanded by new circumstances, a certain

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[22] Lindbeck, *Church in a Postliberal Age*, 146.

[23] Lindbeck, *Church in a Postliberal Age*, 149.

[24] Lindbeck, *Church in a Postliberal Age*, 149-150.

[25] Lindbeck, *Church in a Postliberal Age*, 157-160.

"identifiable code" composed of at least four elements remains intact:[26] (1) the Church's identity rests on God's election, not on its faithfulness; (2) elect communities bear objective marks that are both blessing and curse depending on how they are received (e.g., circumcision, baptism, Shema, and the confession of Christ as Lord); (3) election is communal since individuals are part of the elect by virtue of visible membership in God's people; and (4) the primary mission of the chosen people is to witness to the judging and saving God, not to judge and save the damned. In unpacking the latter, Lindbeck emphasizes that the Church's job is not to fix the world around it, but to begin with the needs of its own communities. This is because God wills the Church to be a light to the world in the same way Israel was called to be a light—by the quality of its communal life together.[27] Lindbeck argues that these conclusions are not only biblical, but ecumenical: "The Church thus identified sounds Catholic in its comprehensiveness, Calvinist in the unconditionality of its chosenness, and Lutheran in its possibilities of unfaithfulness while remaining genuinely the Church; but the total effect, not surprisingly, is more Jewish than anything else."[28]

Lindbeck also finds the Old Testament to be relevant in that it provides helpful models of institutions designed to maintain unity.[29] He contends that Israel's story models for the Church both Protestant functionalism, which means that leadership structures must change to fit new circumstances, and Catholic institutionalism, which means that some sort of centralized leadership is always needed since God always works

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[26] Lindbeck, *Church in a Postliberal Age*, 157.

[27] Lindbeck, *Church in a Postliberal Age*, 159.

[28] Lindbeck, *Church in a Postliberal Age*, 157-158.

[29] Lindbeck, *Church in a Postliberal Age*, 160-165.

from a central base in the Old Testament. Lindbeck deduces from this that God has

continued beyond biblical history to use centralized structures that may not be lightly

discarded. This means for Lindbeck that tradition is given a privileged place, continuity

must be preserved, and preference should always be given to reforming older structures

rather than replacing them. It should be noted, however, that Lindbeck qualifies this

conclusion by noting that Israel's monarchy, its most centralized form of government, did

not endure.[30] So we should see the Old Testament as furnishing a consistent framework

to reflect upon, but not an exact ecclesial formula to be implemented. Lindbeck himself

believes that the most suitable unitive structure for our own time is a worldwide network

of tenaciously interconnected yet organizationally self-reliant churches. He sees this

model in the early Catholics.[31]

Despite its brevity, Lindbeck's account has much to commend it. He looks to

specific structures in Israel's life and asks how they may inform ecclesial life, mission,

and structure. He notes how concrete practices in Israel's life parallel those of the

Church. He sees a certain degree of situational fluidity in Israel over time that may be

helpful to guide the Church through its own changing circumstances. In short, Lindbeck

does with the Old Testament on a small scale what needs to be done on a large scale.

These strengths notwithstanding, Lindbeck's approach is beset by a few

weaknesses. First, Lindbeck brings to the text a strong bias toward centralized structures

of unity. This may reflect that Lindbeck writes from a Lutheran-in-conversation-with-

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[30] Lindbeck, *Church in a Postliberal Age*, 163.

[31] Lindbeck, *Church in a Postliberal Age*, 165.

Roman-Catholics perspective.[32] Nonetheless, this bias causes him to privilege Israel's

monarchy more than is appropriate. Old Testament scholars have long questioned such

privileging of the monarchical period.[33] Not only does monarchy represent a relatively

narrow segment of Israel's Old Testament story, but multiple strands within the Old

Testament are highly critical of Israel's choice of that particular form of government.[34]

Lindbeck's account also suffers for failing to engage how the New Testament,

particularly the revelation of God in Jesus, might shed light on how to interpret key Old

Testament events. This is surprising considering Lindbeck's narrative approach to

Scripture,[35] which acknowledges Christ as the fulfillment of Israel. If Jesus is the

culmination of the Old Testament story as Lindbeck claims,[36] then the kind of reign he

established ought to provide criteria for evaluating whether certain trajectories in Israel's

story were positive or negative. Lindbeck seems to be headed in this direction when he

claims that Jesus—and not the Church—is the antitype of Israel and that "Israel's story,

*transposed into a new key through Christ*, becomes prototypical for the history of the

Church which is its continuation rather than its fulfillment."[37] Apparently, for Lindbeck,

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[32] Lindbeck offers a brief autobiographical sketch of his ecumenical journey in *Church in a Postliberal Age*, 1-9.

[33] Walter Brueggemann draws attention to this common misstep in "Rethinking Church Models through Scripture," *Theology Today* 48, no. 2 (1991), 129-130. See also Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church? Toward a Theology of the People of God* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 107; and John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), 31-70.

[34] Cf. Judg 8:22, 23; 9:1-15; 1 Sam 8:1-22; and Hos 8:4; 13:11. This will be discussed at length in forthcoming chapters.

[35] Lindbeck discusses his narrative approach in "The Story-Shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation," in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, ed. Garrett Green (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 161-178.

[36] Lindbeck, *Church in a Postliberal Age*, 150; and "Story-Shaped Church," 166.

[37] Lindbeck, *Church in a Postliberal Age*, 150 (emphasis added).

this transposition means neither that Jesus' critique of lording-over leadership and sword-wielding politics nor his advocacy for a more egalitarian view of social relations and a peaceful servant's posture in this world are relevant to identifying faithful continuity within Israel's story. Instead Lindbeck ignores Torah's non-centralized vision of tribal unity and leadership, interprets monarchy as exemplary, skips over the exilic and post-exilic diasporic constitution of God's people, and then finds agreeable continuity between Israelite monarchical and post-Constantinian ecclesial structures.[38] This selective narration contradicts Lindbeck's claim to recover pre-Constantinian organizational patterns in order to develop his Israel-like view of the Church.[39] As both Brueggemann and Lohfink argue below, Constantinian ecclesial patterns draw heavily upon Israel's monarchial period whereas pre-Constantinian patterns better reflect pre- and post-monarchial periods. I suspect that this apparent contradiction reflects Lindbeck's failure to seriously engage what Bible scholars have been saying about various eras in Israel's history. In an effort to read the Bible unencumbered by modern critical techniques, Lindbeck appears to have tailored his reading of the Old Testament to fit ecclesial convictions he already held.

One wonders whether Lindbeck would have advocated such selective Old Testament appropriation had Free Church theologians, like John Howard Yoder, been a significant part of his ecumenical dialogue. A truly ecumenical approach must take such conversation partners seriously. Yet one should not assume that only Free Church thinkers would challenge Lindbeck's monarchy-privileging reading. As demonstrated

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[38] Chapters 4, 6, and 7 demonstrate why Lindbeck's selective reading is problematic.

[39] Lindbeck, *Church in a Postliberal Age*, 7.

below, both Brueggemann and Lohfink, neither of whom is from the Free Church

tradition, challenge this interpretation based on a careful reading of Scripture.

*Walter Brueggemann*

> *It is my intention and hope that my exploration in the Old Testament will suggest larger lines of reflection and other characterizations of the church far beyond the Old Testament.*[40]

In "Rethinking Church Models through Scripture," Old Testament scholar Walter

Brueggemann appears to pick up where Lindbeck left off. Though Brueggemann's

concern to appropriate the Old Testament for ecclesiology parallels that of Lindbeck,[41]

his context and agenda (not to mention his conclusions) do not. Whereas Lindbeck

engages Protestant and Catholic ecumenism, Brueggemann addresses disestablished

churches in a pluralistic milieu. He begins by asserting that no single ecclesial model is

normative for all time.[42] He is concerned that the Church has neglected certain ecclesial

models in the Old Testament due to the unwarranted belief that the only or most

important model one finds there is the state-cult arrangement of the Davidic monarchy.

Since this arrangement does not directly apply to the contemporary western world, it is

often assumed that the Old Testament has little to offer when it comes to ecclesial

models. As noted above, Lindbeck moves beyond such faulty assumptions in advocating

and exemplifying deliberate appropriation of the Old Testament for ecclesiology. Yet

Lindbeck's monarchy-privileging approach causes him to neglect pre- and post-

monarchical models that might challenge the ecclesial implications he draws from the

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[40] Walter Brueggemann, "Rethinking Church Models through Scripture," *Theology Today* 48, no. 2 (1991): 129.

[41] Brueggemann, "Rethinking Church Models," 132, fn. 8.

[42] Brueggemann, "Rethinking Church Models," 128-129.

Old Testament.[43] Though not engaging him directly, Brueggemann moves beyond

Lindbeck by offering a typology of three Old Testament ecclesial models that the Church

should recognize and engage. I will now briefly sketch each one.

(1) Rather than proceed chronologically, Brueggemann starts in the middle, with

the *temple-royal-prophetic model* that predominated in Israel from 1000-587 B.C.E.

Brueggemann starts here because, as acknowledged above, this model is most often

presumed to be normative in the Old Testament, especially from the perspective of the

"established, culturally legitimated Church."[44] This model exhibits four noteworthy

characteristics: stable religious institutions (temple and priests), sympathetic civic

leadership (kings), secularizing intelligentsia (sages), and passionate prophecy

(prophets).[45] Brueggemann points out that, far from representing the Old Testament as a

whole, this model was a brief episode in Israel's life that was swept away by God

because he no longer deemed it acceptable.[46] Though Brueggemann clearly repudiates

this model for churches in the post-Christendom Western world, he nonetheless regards it

"fitting and appropriate for a time of stable, established power."[47]

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[43] That said, neither Lindbeck nor other scholars with similar convictions are the primary object of Brueggemann's critique. Brueggemann's primary foils are those who neglect the Old Testament's contributions to ecclesiology out of the conviction that monarchy is the Old Testament norm and the Church no longer lives in a monarchical context. One wonders, however, whether Brueggemann is subtly damning Lindbeck with faint praise. On p. 132, n. 8, Brueggemann affirms Lindbeck's observation that the Church is a storied community, but he never extols Lindbeck's appropriation of the Old Testament for ecclesiology as a model from which we may learn.

[44] Brueggemann, "Rethinking Church Models," 130. It is worth noting that Lindbeck's ecclesial journey led him at first to distain the Christendom model of Church and later to appreciate its benefits for society as a whole (*Church in a Postliberal Age*, 2 and 7).

[45] Brueggemann, "Rethinking Church Models," 130-131.

[46] Brueggemann, "Rethinking Church Models," 131.

[47] Brueggemann, "Rethinking Church Models," 131.

(2) The period preceding the monarchy, from 1250-1000 B.C.E., Brueggemann identifies as the *wilderness model*, which lasted from Moses to David.[48] Brueggemann identifies five characteristics of this period: it was supported by an Exodus liturgy that formed Israel to be an alternative community to the dominant social realities of its day; it lived from the meeting at Sinai in so far as the Israelites committed to an endless process of reinterpreting Torah; it lacked the aforementioned four characteristics of the monarchical model; it segmented the community into extended family units and tribes; and it resided in the wilderness and other marginal lands that no one else wanted. Brueggemann calls this model a "new church start" because it faced similar risks and shunned established social relations that often lead to domestication and bondage.

(3) Following the monarchy, which collapsed in 586 B.C.E., Brueggemann sees Israel as exhibiting the *textual community model*. Such a community exercises little influence over public policy (submitting instead to the reign of foreign rulers) and faces regular temptations to cultural syncretism (seeking the acceptance of those foreign rulers). In order to maintain its identity under such conditions, Israel developed three mechanisms for survival: the recovery of memory and connectedness as evident in meticulous genealogies, the intense practice of hope as embodied in apocalyptic writings, and the evolution into a textual community that was eventually supported by synagogues and rabbis.[49] It is important to note, according to Brueggemann, that this textual community was much like the new church start model of the wilderness community. He supports this claim with canonical criticism's common observation that this textual

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[48] Brueggemann, "Rethinking Church Models," 131-133.

[49] Brueggemann, "Rethinking Church Models," 134-135.

community was most responsible for writing and/or re-writing the canonical record we now have in Torah. These events were critical to the textual community because post-exilic Israelites looked back past the monarchy to this initial period for its identity and guidance.[50]

Far from identifying monarchy as the definitive Old Testament model, Brueggemann presents disestablishment models as the first and the last, the beginning and the end. In this vein, he goes on to note that "such power as the Davidic monarchy had was a brief (400 years) passing episode, not to be replicated ever again in the life of this people of God."[51] By way of contrast, Brueggemann commends the wilderness and textual communities as congenial to our own day and thus valuable resources for contemporary ecclesial reflection.

Brueggemann thus does a better job than Lindbeck in recognizing the multiplicity of Old Testament ecclesial models and both calling into question the dominant monarchial model and noting its connection to current ecclesiological postures (namely, that establishment churches most adamantly affirm the goodness of monarchy). It is not clear, however, that Brueggemann fully escapes the practice of allowing the current situation to dictate what Old Testament pattern is most appropriate. Though he critiques monarchy-privileging readings on the aforementioned grounds, he does little to show why disestablishment models are better, other than that they appear to better fit the contemporary context. Though he notices that the final form of the canon privileges non-establishment ecclesial forms and for the most part disparages the monarchy,

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[50] Brueggemann, "Rethinking Church Models," 136-137.

[51] Brueggemann, "Rethinking Church Models," 131.

Brueggemann does not count this an inherent liability in the monarchial model. The only

problem with monarchy, according to this article,[52] is that it does not fit our current

situation very well. Like Lindbeck, Brueggemann fails to bring Christ to bear in his final

analysis, despite the fact that the final canonical form for Christians includes the work of

Christ and gives it interpretive precedence.

*Gerhard Lohfink*

> *The Church is not only rooted in Israel; it belongs to Israel. It cannot understand itself at all if it does not continually look back to its origins, beginning with Abraham.*[53]

The kind of Old Testament ecclesial analysis that Lindbeck commends is best

exemplified in Gerhard Lohfink's *Does God Need the Church?* Though only a third of

this book is dedicated to the Old Testament, that third comprises 120 pages, which is

more than any other ecclesial tome has dedicated to this subject. In this work Lohfink, a

Roman Catholic New Testament scholar and astute interpreter of the Old Testament,

seeks to go back to the primeval roots of the Church, which he locates in God's intentions

for creating the world. Toward that end, Lohfink goes back not just to the Old Testament

itself but beyond it to fundamental questions about God, creation, evolution, and

history.[54]

Such questions drive Lohfink's first chapter entitled "Why God Needs a Special

People." Lohfink begins by distinguishing between the God of Scripture and the gods of

the ancient world. Israel's God was not an extension of creation; he stood before it as

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[52] Brueggemann expresses deeper reservations about the monarchy in *Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 21-37.

[53] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 49.

[54] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* ix.

creator, apart from it as wholly other, and above it as ruler of history.[55] It is crucial for

Lohfink to note that Israel's God did not create the world as a fully-programmed and

therefore predictable machine. Rather he made the natural world in such a way that

creation itself brings forth vegetation, animals, and humans (evolution) and that these

humans are genuinely able to say "no" and therefore "yes" to God's will for their lives

(free will).[56] This means that God willfully and purposefully risks a history that is tainted

by sin. Such sin, of course, works its way immediately into the story. As a result, the

creation that God initially identified as "very good" (Gen 1:31) is later identified as

entirely "corrupt" (Gen 6:12). Yet the fact that the Bible story begins in Genesis with the

corruption of all humans and ends in Revelation with a picture of salvation extended to

all nations indicates that what God intends to do through his elect people he does for the

entire world. The question is: How will God extend his salvific purposes without

compromising human freedom? Lohfink's answer to this question is central to his view

of how the Old Testament should be appropriated for ecclesiology:

> It can only be that God begins in a small way, at one single place in the world.
> There must be a place, visible, tangible, where the salvation of the world can
> begin: that is, where the world becomes what it is supposed to be according to
> God's plan. Beginning at that place, the new thing can spread abroad, but not
> through persuasion, not through indoctrination, not through violence. Everyone
> must have the opportunity to come and see. All must have the chance to behold
> and test this new thing. Then, if they want to, they can allow themselves to be
> drawn into the history of salvation that God is creating. Only in that way can their
> freedom be preserved. What drives them to that new thing cannot be force, not
> even moral pressure, but only the fascination of a world that is changed.[57]

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[55] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 2.

[56] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 20.

[57] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 27.

According to Lohfink, this is where Israel enters the picture. God chose Abraham and his descendants to begin forming the kind of just society God has always intended the world to be.[58] But why Abraham? Why Israel? From God's perspective the reason is election, God's mysterious choice. From the point of view of the world and natural circumstances, it is the confluence of the right place (a seemingly insignificant plot of land located in the midst of the nations), the right time (when nearby empires appeared to be arriving at their zenith and thus constituted a robust foil), and the right people (one that is willing to leave its old world behind and trust God).[59] It is not because Israel was morally superior that God chose them, and it was certainly not for their own sake that he chose them. Lohfink goes on to explain: "God's choice fell on Israel for the sake of the nations. God needs a witness in the world, a people in which God's salvation can be made visible. That is why the burden of election rests on the chosen people. Israel's being chosen is not a privilege or a preference *over* others, but existence *for others*, and hence the heaviest burden in history."[60]

In wrapping up this chapter, Lohfink anticipates a formidable objection to his case for why God needs a people. If God has granted humans freedom to reject his will for them, then it is conceivable that God's intentions for creation will fail. In what sense, then, is God all-powerful? Lohfink responds that God's omnipotence is not only rooted in his ability to do everything that lies within his will but also in "that God, despite all human refusals and in the face of all the history of evil that flows from it, will reach the goal in the end: a people that turns to God in confidence, and with that confidence and

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[58] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 31.

[59] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 31-36.

[60] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 37.

trust transforms the entire world."[61] Apparently, Lohfink reasons, only a God of infinite

power and confidence would risk the vulnerability of a creation like ours.

Had Lohfink stopped here, he would have entered provocatively into ongoing

discussions of how God's mission and people are rooted in the early chapters of Genesis.

This much, however, is quite common. Of the little use most ecclesial primers make of

the Old Testament, Genesis 1-12 routinely elicits some attention.[62] It is in chapter 2, then,

that Lohfink significantly broadens the conversation. In this chapter, Lohfink discusses

seven characteristic signs of Israel, summarized in the following list, each of which he

applies to the Church's self-understanding:

1. Following scholars who narrate Israel's settlement into Canaan based on archaeological evidence as a "gathering" of former Egyptian slaves, nomadic groups associated with the familiar names of Israel's patriarchs, and agrarian defectors from oppressive Canaanite city states, Lohfink emphasizes the gathered nature of the Church.[63]
2. Stressing the degree of faith required by Abraham, the Patriarchs, and the wandering Israelites, Lohfink argues that pure genealogy was never enough for true inclusion into God's people and that the Church, too, is comprised of a people who must leave their old way of life behind and live by faith.[64]
3. Enumerating various ways the Israelites could have responded to their slavery in Egypt, Lohfink observes that God's people, both then and now, must come out and be separate from the wider society and enter into God's new society.[65]
4. Noting the socially-pioneering substance of Torah and its overarching concern that Israel worship God with every aspect of its life, Lohfink argues that the Church must address both inner and outer life, transform its conception of space and time, engage both the individual and the social, and constantly distinguish between what reflects God's holiness and what does not.[66]

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[61] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 40.

[62] E.g., Craig Van Gelder, *Essence of the Church*, 88-96.

[63] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 51-60.

[64] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 60-66.

[65] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 67-74.

[66] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 74-88.

5. Chronicling Israel's history of resistance, Lohfink urges the Church to own up to its own history of unfaithfulness with the kind of vulnerability and transparency of Israel's chronographers.[67]
6. Focusing on the work of the prophets and narrating Israel's legacy of punishment followed by restoration, Lohfink reminds God's people that their history always hangs by a thin thread and that this thread does not break because God's fidelity is equal to the weight of human infidelity.[68]
7. Exploring the various forms Israel's life took throughout the Old Testament, Lohfink concludes that the Israelites finally settled into a form that God has always intended for his people and the form that the Church, too, must take.[69]

This final characteristic requires further explanation because of how it intersects with the work of Lindbeck, Brueggemann, and Yoder. In this section, Lohfink identifies four distinct forms that Israel took during four phases of its life together. From roughly 1200-1000 B.C.E., God's people took the form of a *tribal society*. Lohfink narrates this period charitably as "a deliberate counter-model over against the monarchically organized Canaanite city states."[70] Though he lauds it for its voluntariness and emphasis on equality, he also notes its vulnerability to outbreaks of violence. From 1000-586 B.C.E., God's people took the form of a *nation*. Lohfink narrates this period as an experiment intended to unify the Israelites against foreign invasion, but one that rapidly assumed the form of other ancient near eastern monarchies with their strong centralized power, excessive taxation, expansionist warfare, state religion, and forced labor. Though this experiment failed miserably and came to a terrible end, it nonetheless retained a promise for a future Davidic king who would truly follow God's will and build a just

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[67] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 88-97.

[68] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 97-106.

[69] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 106-119.

[70] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 108.

society.[71] From 515 B.C.E. to 70 C.E., God's people in Palestine took the form of a

*temple community*. Lohfink notes that during this period Israel existed as a society under

the supervision of foreign rule. Their identity was no longer linked with national

structures but with priestly leadership, temple practices, and Torah instruction. It is not

accidental, Lohfink points out, that the Torah around which this community rallied

almost completely ignores the state phase of Israel's existence and draws heavily upon

earlier days when God's people sought a more egalitarian and just society.[72] Not long

after 586 B.C.E., God's people, who were scattered throughout the nations and lacked

access to the Jerusalem temple, eventually formed a *federation of synagogues* gathered

around Torah. Lohfink clarifies that synagogues were not merely houses of personal

prayer, but full-service community centers that provided for the economic, legal,

educational, and social needs of these scattered communities. According to Lohfink, such

communities became the norm for all Jews after the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E.,

as well as for the early Christian communities. Lohfink expresses the highest regard for

this form of God's people, saying: "Here appeared with full clarity what the people of

God is: a network of communities spread over the whole earth and yet existing within

non-Christian society, so that each person can freely choose whether to be a Christian or

not; it is genuine community and yet not constructed on the model of pagan society, a

true homeland and yet not a state."[73] Having thus outlined Israel's history, the final two-

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[71] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 112.

[72] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 113-114.

[73] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 118.

thirds of Lohfink's book focuses on Christ, his community of disciples, and the characteristic signs of the Church.

Lohfink's work is a remarkable accomplishment. He draws extensively upon Israel's story to help the Church identify strengths and weakness of past configurations of God's people so Christians may avoid repeating Israel's mistakes. Like Lindbeck, Lohfink notes that the people of God assumed diverse forms during different circumstances; moving beyond Lindbeck, he does not privilege the monarchical period but evaluates the models of each period from a canonical perspective that draws heavily upon recent biblical scholarship. Like Brueggemann, he draws strong parallels between the Church's social location today and that of Israel both before and after the monarchy, giving preference to the synagogue model. He notes that monarchy was a dangerous idea for Israel and laments the role it later played in the Church's self-understanding. With the expertise of a seasoned scholar, Lohfink finds a way to narrate Israel's full legacy, including monarchy, both charitably and critically.[74] Moving beyond Brueggemann, Lohfink draws more from the entire Old Testament canon and notes genuine movement toward a kind of model that he argues is more germane to the Church's self-understanding than others.

The above accolades notwithstanding, Lohfink's work leaves much to be desired and more to be done. To begin with, Lohfink operates extensively with a set of philosophical assumptions that he brings to the text but does not substantiate with the text. Foremost is his conviction that God needs a people primarily because God must find a solution to the world's problems that keeps the freedom of the human will intact. This

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[74] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 217.

perspective endures throughout the book as Lohfink tends to underemphasize God's role in guiding his people, apparently to respect human freedom.[75] As a result, it seems that God is simply stuck having to tolerate whatever social experiments his people concoct. Similarly, the preservation of human freedom serves as an important criterion for why Lohfink prefers the synagogue model to that of monarchy. This perspective may or may not be true, but it is an assumption that bears a tremendous amount of weight in Lohfink's argument throughout the book.

Some readers may also question the emphasis Lohfink gives to "what really happened" behind the events of the text. For instance, he makes much of evolutionary theory, as well as how modern archaeologists suppose the Israelites came to occupy the Promised Land. As Lindbeck's account suffered for not engaging historical critical studies and operating only with the "plain sense" of Scripture, Lohfink's account perhaps suffers for pushing too much in the opposite direction—giving too much weight to theories of what happened beneath the canonical texts.

Dialogue with Yoder might also have helped Lohfink develop more robust criteria for favoring the synagogue model as he does. Maximum allowance for human freedom is not enough if one is not already predisposed to affirm such criteria. As we will see, Yoder affirms criteria that are internal to the story itself once one grants that Jesus is the definitive revelation of God's purposes for his people. Though Lohfink goes on to show that the early church's life was strikingly similar to that of the synagogue community, he

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[75] E.g., according to Lohfink, God's people felt compelled to adopt monarchical rule because the tribal society was nearly helpless before invaders. In the biblical narrative, however, God had provided a system of defense during this period, namely, YHWH wars in which Israel must call upon God to fight on its behalf. These are discussed in depth in chapter 3. That Lohfink fails to mention this significant option may reflect his conviction that dramatic divine interventions are not a constitutive part of the story (lest human freedom be compromised?).

does not address why such correspondence is more than an accident of parallel social contexts. Nonetheless, in the history of scholarship, Lohfink has gone further than anyone in offering a thorough Old Testament foundation for ecclesiology.

*Conclusions*

These three scholars have much to teach us about the appropriation of the Old Testament for ecclesiology. They teach us that how one tells the Old Testament story deeply impacts what lessons one learns from it. They teach us that each telling of that story is influenced by the agendas and biases we bring to the text. They teach us that Israel's life was not monolithic and that we need to identify criteria for discerning how to relate the various forms Israel's life took to the Church's own life. Do we rally around the form that best fits our particular ecumenical endeavors? Do we favor forms that most fit the Church's current sociological standing with reference to the wider culture? Do we favor the form that is most amenable to our best theories as to why God called the Church into existence in the first place?

It is little wonder that scholars tend to avoid the Old Testament for ecclesiology. Escaping one's biases seems impossible, and there is so much diversity in the Old Testament that identifying criteria for guiding appropriation seems entirely arbitrary. I do not presume to have transcended the web of complications that beset this project, nor do I think Yoder has, but the conversation could be richer and genuine ecumenical consensus could be greater if more voices participated in the conversation—voices that are pre-critical, critical, and post-critical; Catholic, Protestant, and Radical; systematic, exegetical, and historical. It is not my conviction that Yoder's contributions will end all

debate, but that they enrich the conversation by broadening it in ways that are potentially unifying.

## Method of Approach

### Dialogue

Yoder's unique contribution to ecclesiology stems partly from his particular way of narrating the Old Testament and, consequently, the full biblical story. In order to evaluate this narration, it is necessary to bring it into conversation with scholars who have done extensive work on the shape of Israel's life during key periods whose common interpretation Yoder calls into question,[76] scholars who have performed detailed analysis on particular components of that narrative,[77] and scholars who have engaged Yoder's particular work in these areas.[78] No attempt is made here to present the definitive Old

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[76] E.g., Rainer Albertz, *From the Beginnings to the End of the Monarchy*, vol. 1, and *From the Exile to the Maccabees,* vol. 2 of *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, Old Testament Library, trans. John Bowden (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994); *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century*, Society of Biblical Literature, no. 3, trans. David Green (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); Jon L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); and John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981); and *Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981).

[77] E.g., Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002); W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1974); Millard Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior: Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980); J. G. McConville, *God and Earthly Power: An Old Testament Political Theology: Genesis-Kings* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006); Jill Middlemas, *The Templeless Age: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the "Exile"* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007); Ben C. Ollenburger, *Zion, the City of the Great King: A Theological Symbol of the Jerusalem Cult*, JSOTS 41 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987); J. J. M. Roberts, "In Defense of Monarchy: The Contribution of Israelite Kingship to Biblical Theology," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 377-396; and Daniel L. Smith, *Biblical Theology of Exile*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002); and *Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile* (Bloomington, IN: Meyer-Stone Books, 1989).

[78] E.g., Daniel Boyarin, "Judaism as a Free Church: Footnotes to John Howard Yoder's *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*," *Cross Currents* 56, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 6-21; Michael Cartwright, "Afterword: 'If Abraham is Our Father…' The Problem of Christian Supersessionism *after* Yoder," in *JCSR*, 205-240; and Alain Epp Weaver, *States of Exile: Visions of Diaspora, Witness, and Return* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2008).

Testament narration that will account for all the latest insights of biblical technicians, or to decipher the historical events behind and beneath the text and its various sources. The limited scope of this project involves taking necessarily selective snapshots of what recent scholars are saying about the basic storyline of the text as it stands in its canonical form and bringing them into conversation with Yoder.

<div align="center">Synthesis</div>

There are formidable challenges to using Yoder's work to address ecclesiological neglect of the Old Testament. Yoder did not, at least in writing, advocate for or promote the cause of Old Testament appropriation for ecclesiology, *per se*; he simply modeled it. Nor did Yoder write a full-length monograph in which he lays out his complete Old Testament narration and traces all of its implications for ecclesiology. Rather, he briefly addressed this issue on many occasions while tackling specific ethical issues, and he delved into it more deeply as part of his historical interest in tracing the process by which the Church became separate from the Jewish people.[79] Because of this, it will be necessary to draw upon and synthesize various works of Yoder in order to present a more complete Old Testament narration than Yoder himself presents in any single work.

To set forth Yoder's full Old Testament narration when he had not done so himself risks setting forth one's own narration and attributing it to Yoder. This need not be the case. A comparison to connect-the-dots puzzles is instructive. When someone follows illustrator-provided clues to connect dots with the end result that a clearly identifiable shape emerges, whether that of a bird or a house, that person is doing what the illustrator did not do: connect all the dots and complete the picture. The shape of the

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[79] Cf. Much of this work is collected in *JCSR*.

final picture is, nonetheless, legitimately that of the illustrator who placed the dots where they are and provided clues as to how they ought to be properly connected. Of course, it is possible for someone to connect the dots inappropriately so that the final shape does not resemble what the original illustrator intended. Disciplined attention to clues provided by the illustrator is therefore essential to an accurate final picture. Yoder provides a series of dots located in separate essays with multiple clues as to how they ought to be connected. Sometimes he connects particular dots for us, other times he does not. Part of the task of this essay is to locate the numerous narrative dots that are scattered throughout Yoder's expansive literary production, plot them on a common page, identify the connections Yoder has already made between many of them, and connect the remaining dots that are inferred by Yoder's own project but that Yoder did not himself explicitly connect in published works.[80]

## Revision

The end goal, however, is not simply to restate Yoder's project in a way that is readily accessible. Part of the reason why Yoder's project has not been widely embraced by the scholarly community is because it suffers from several deficiencies. For this reason, I draw upon the work of recent scholarship in order to evaluate Yoder's account and to revise his overall Old Testament narration. This revision fills important gaps in Yoder's narration and attempts to transcend its debilitating weaknesses in ways consistent with the beginning he made. Finally, I discuss the implications of this revised

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[80] The closest Yoder comes to identifying the essential components of his Old Testament narration is a brief section of "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," in *JCSR*, 70-72; and "To Serve our God," in *Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 133-135.

narration for ecclesiology. I offer this revised narration not as a comprehensive approach

to ecclesiology that makes all others superfluous but as a helpful frame of reference

within which other, more focused approaches may be explored. Methodologically

speaking, ecclesiology is better off beginning with a wide-angle lens of this sort.

## Preview of Chapters

Yoder has not written a single systematic treatise that outlines his view of the Old

Testament's contributions to ecclesiology (or any other topic).[81] Rather, he has written

multiple occasional pieces on various topics that touch upon this subject.[82] Their

cumulative effect is a unique way of narrating the biblical story from Old Testament to

New Testament that has important implications for ecclesiology. To appreciate the

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[81] Works that present the big picture of Yoder's theological project include Craig Carter, *Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001); and Mark Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

[82] Cf. "The Hilltop City," "Turn, Turn," and "The Voice of your Brother's Blood," in *He Came Preaching Peace* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985); "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist" and "See How They Go with Their Face to the Sun," in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* [hereafter *JCSR*], eds. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); "Behold My Servant Shall Prosper," in *Karl Barth and the Problem of War and Other Essays on Barth*, ed. Mark T. Nation (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2003); "Biblical Roots of Liberation Theology," *Grail* (Sept 1985): 55-74; "Creation and Gospel," *Perspectives—A Journal of Reformed Thought* 3 (Oct 1988): 8-10; "Exodus: Probing the Meaning of Liberation," *Sojourners* 5 (S 1976): 26-29; "Exodus and Exile: The Two Faces of Liberation," *Cross Currents* 23, no. 3 (Fall 1973): 297-309; "Generating Alternative Paradigms," in *Human Values and the Environment: Conference Proceedings*, Report 140 (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, 1992), 56-62 [available on-line under the title "Cult and Culture in and after Eden: On Generating Alternative Paradigms," http://theology.nd.edu/people/research/yoder-john/documents/, accessed on Feb. 18, 2009]; "God will Fight for Us," in *Politics of Jesus*, *Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 76-88; "If Abraham Is Our Father," in *Original Revolution* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), 91-112; "Introduction" to Millard Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), 17-19; "Meaning after Babel: With Jeffrey Stout beyond Relativism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24, vol. 1 (Spr 1996): 125-139; "Noah's Covenant and the Purpose of Punishment," in *Readings in Christian Ethics*, vol. 2, *Issues and Applications*, eds. David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 471-481 [originally published as a chapter in *The Death Penalty Debate*, co-authored with H. Wayne House (Dallas: Word, 1991), 119-132]; "Texts that Serve or Texts that Summon: A Response to Michael Walzer," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 20 (Fall 1992): 229-234; "'Thou Shalt Not Kill' (Exodus 20:13)," in *To Hear the Word* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 39-46; and "'To Your Tents, O Israel': The Legacy of Israel's Experience with Holy War," *Studies in Religion* 18, no. 3 (Sum 1989): 545-562.

substance and coherence of Yoder's narration, it is necessary to understand his distinct biblical hermeneutic and to locate his Old Testament narration within his overall view of world history. Chapter 2, "Yoder's Approach to the Old Testament," therefore discusses and illustrates Yoder's canonical-directional approach to Scripture and sets forth his six-stage ecclesial historiography, from creation to the contemporary Free Church tradition, of which his Old Testament narration is a constitutive part.

In chapters 3 and 4 I draw upon numerous essays written by Yoder in order to present his particular Old Testament narration, thereby laying a foundation for discussing its impact on ecclesiology. Chapter 3, "Yoder's Old Testament Narration: Primeval History," discusses the primeval beginnings of Yoder's narration, from creation through the Babel account in Genesis 11. The events of these chapters are foundational for Yoder because they establish the nature of human dysfunction in this world and the nature of divine grace that refuses to leave humans alone in their dysfunction. This chapter accentuates both why God decides to form a chosen people and what that people should *not* be like.

Chapter 4, "Yoder's Old Testament Narration: Israel's History," completes Yoder's Old Testament narration, from Abraham's call in Genesis 12 to the Jewish diaspora. From the beginning of Israel's existence, according to Yoder, the kingship of YHWH[83] and its requisite call for absolute trust and dependence on him alone is

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[83] Throughout his essays, Yoder used a variety of designations to refer to the personal name of Israel's God in the Old Testament, including Yahweh, Jahweh, Jehovah, YHWH, and JHWH. Though this essay preserves the variety present in quotes from Yoder's work, it otherwise follows the practice of revering the divine name by not writing it out fully but by writing the four English letters YHWH to represent the four Hebrew consonants of the Tetragrammaton: יהוה. R. Kendall Soulen submits three reasons why Christians should stop the misguided practice of calling Israel's God "Yahweh": it is only a scholarly conjecture with no historical basis in Israel or the Church's worship language, it is offensive to reverent Jews, and it is antithetical to the texture of the New Testament's own witness. Cf. Soulen, "The Name of the Holy Trinity: A Triune Name," *Theology Today* 59, no. 2 (July 2002): 253.

normative for Israel's social identity. He regards the restructuring of Israel's life at the time of the monarchy as an abandonment of that fundamental posture and thus a nearly fatal misstep that God began to correct beginning with the exile. Through the work of the prophet Jeremiah and others, God began reconfiguring his people as a transterritorial nation with no homeland so they would be strategically positioned to bless and bear witness to all nations. Chapters three and four support my thesis by clearly presenting the biblical contributions of Yoder that serve as my ecclesiological point of departure.

Chapter 5, "Addressing Preliminary Objections to Yoder's Old Testament Narration," is concerned with two forms of preliminary objection to Yoder's narration. By "preliminary," I mean objections that are not about Yoder's particular interpretation of the text itself but about the methods he employs (e.g., reading selectively, realistically, backwardly, and modernistically) or alleged theological implications of his narration (e.g., Marcionism, pacifism, divine militarism, and supersessionism). Some of these objections are more grounded and incriminating than others. I defend Yoder's narration where appropriate and highlight objections to it that must be engaged if Yoder's narration is to be usefully appropriated for ecclesiology.

Chapter 6, "Evaluating and Revising the Substance of Yoder's Old Testament Narration," continues and extends the evaluation of chapter 5. It moves beyond preliminary objections to address the substance of Yoder's textual narration, and it moves beyond criticism to make concrete suggestions about how Yoder's narration may be improved. Sometimes this is a matter of filling a void in Yoder's narration (e.g., lack of a robust flood account). Other times it requires making significant alterations to Yoder's narration (e.g., offering an alternative view of the refortification projects of Ezra and

Nehemiah). The end result is a significantly expanded—though not comprehensive—Yoderian narration of the Old Testament that may be fruitfully engaged for ecclesiological purposes. This kind of robust Old Testament engagement, which is lacking in most ecclesiological primers, paves the way for the ecclesiological analysis of the final chapter.

Chapter 7, "The Kingship of YHWH and Priesthood of his People," concludes this study by discussing the implications of the Old Testament for ecclesiology. It begins by noting the big picture ecumenical contributions that Yoder's canonical-directional hermeneutic makes to ecclesial appropriation of the Old Testament. It then details two sets of implications of the revised narration offered in this essay for ecclesiology: (1) the ecclesial implications of YHWH's kingship, and (2) the ecclesial implications of the Church's priestly vocation. Grounding these implications in a robust Old Testament narration exemplifies the rich contributions the Old Testament makes to ecclesiology when it is carefully engaged for such purposes.

CHAPTER 2: YODER'S APPROACH TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

## Introduction

It may seem odd to focus on an ethicist's Old Testament narration, especially an ethicist whose doctorate was in historical theology and whose primary contribution to scholarship was his relentless advocacy for Christian nonviolence. Yet Yoder was quite conversant with biblical studies, particularly the Old Testament. In fact, Yoder took more classes in Old Testament than in any other subject at the University of Basel where he earned his terminal degree.[1] This partially accounts for why Yoder has been able to publish a considerable number of essays—at least eighteen—that focus primarily on Old Testament texts.[2]

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[1] Yoder took 44 credit hours of coursework in Old Testament, 27 of which were with renowned Old Testament scholar Walther Eichrodt (more than he took with any other professor). In total, Yoder completed 72 hours of coursework in biblical studies and only 34 in theology and 31 in church history. Though credit hour equivalency at Basel may differ from what is common in the United States, the ratio remains instructive. Cf. Earl Zimmerman, *Practicing the Politics of Jesus: The Origin and Significance of John Howard Yoder's Social Ethics* (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2007), 105.

[2] Cf. Yoder, "The Hilltop City," "Turn, Turn," and "The Voice of your Brother's Blood," in *He Came Preaching Peace* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985); "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist" and "See How They Go with Their Face to the Sun," in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* [hereafter *JCSR*], eds. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); "Behold My Servant Shall Prosper," in *Karl Barth and the Problem of War and Other Essays on Barth*, ed. Mark T. Nation (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2003); "Biblical Roots of Liberation Theology," *Grail* (Sept 1985): 55-74; "Creation and Gospel," *Perspectives—A Journal of Reformed Thought* 3 (Oct 1988): 8-10; "Exodus: Probing the Meaning of Liberation," *Sojourners* 5 (S 1976): 26-29; "Exodus and Exile: The Two Faces of Liberation," *Cross Currents* 23, no. 3 (Fall 1973): 297-309; "Generating Alternative Paradigms," in *Human Values and the Environment: Conference Proceedings*, Report 140 (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, 1992), 56-62 [available on-line under the title "Cult and Culture in and after Eden: On Generating Alternative Paradigms," http://theology.nd.edu/people/research/yoder-john/documents/, accessed on Feb. 18, 2009]; "God Will Fight for Us," in *Politics of Jesus*, *Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 76-88; "If Abraham Is Our Father," in *Original Revolution* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), 91-112; "Introduction" to Millard Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), 17-19; "Meaning After Babel: With Jeffrey Stout beyond Relativism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24, vol. 1 (Spr 1996): 125-139; "Noah's Covenant

These statistics, however, can be misleading. Yoder never claimed to be an Old Testament scholar nor was he one in the traditional sense of the term. He did not seek to advance the field of Old Testament studies, and he did not write about the Old Testament for its own sake. He seldom evaluated, critiqued, or corrected specific Old Testament scholars, and he refrained from entering into their debates as if one of them.

Nevertheless, Yoder's amateur (yet informed) essays on Old Testament topics address questions about the relevance of Old Testament violence to Christian pacifism and suggest a wider biblical context for key issues in ecclesiology, social ethics, epistemology, and Jewish-Christian relations. To do this, Yoder draws insights from Bible scholars and canonical critics in order to demonstrate how passages in one book inform passages in another book, and still another, until a discernable trajectory emerges from Genesis to Revelation. The basic contours of this trajectory are evident in the following excerpt:

> From Moses' saying "stand still" at the edge of the sea, and Isaiah's saying "take heed, be quiet, do not fear" at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the fuller's field road, through Jeremiah's denunciation of the "lying dreams" of Hananiah and Shemaiah, to the non-violence of the Jewish communities of the second century, whether the messianic ones (whom we now call "Christians") or the rabbinic ones (whom we now call "Jews"), is a crooked developmental line, but it is an organic line…The canonical collection demands that it be read as directional—moving from patriarchs to pharaoh, from exodus to Sinai, from judges into kingship and back out.[3]

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and the Purpose of Punishment," in *Readings in Christian Ethics*, vol. 2, *Issues and Applications*, eds. David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 471-481 [originally published as a chapter in *The Death Penalty Debate*, co-authored with H. Wayne House (Dallas: Word, 1991), 119-132]; "Texts that Serve or Texts that Summon: A Response to Michael Walzer," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 20 (Fall 1992): 229-234; "'Thou shalt not Kill' (Exodus 20:13)," in *To Hear the Word* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 39-46; and "'To Your Tents, O Israel': The Legacy of Israel's Experience with Holy War," *Studies in Religion* 18, no. 3 (Sum 1989): 545-562.

[3] Yoder, "To your tents," 353…355.

It is this particular way Yoder splices passages and themes together into a coherent overarching, though not comprehensive Old Testament narrative that sets his reading apart and makes him an important ecclesiological conversation partner.[4] It is difficult to appreciate this narrative, however, if one does not understand Yoder's particular biblical hermeneutic and the wider historiographical context within which he read Scripture. That is to say, Yoder's narration of the Old Testament story belongs to a wider narration apart from which it is not fully comprehended. The burden of this chapter is therefore to introduce Yoder's canonical-directional hermeneutic, to illustrate this hermeneutic with two examples from lesser known Old Testament essays by Yoder, and to sketch his broader ecclesial historiography.

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[4] Though Yoder never presents his entire Old Testament narration in a single essay, there is ample reason to believe that the narration presented in chapters three and four is presupposed in Yoder's thought. This is demonstrated, in part, by the correspondence between the sketch offered in this essay and the skeletal outline Yoder offers in "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," in *JCSR*, 70-72. In this work, Yoder briefly sketches how he believes first century Jews (and thus first century Christians) should have read Jewish history. For comparison's sake, I organize chronologically and enumerate the key moments of Yoder's sketch as follows: (1) the origins of violence and the state in the primeval fall of Adam, sin of Cain, and covenant with Noah; (2) the anti-royal and egalitarian nature of the covenant God made with Israel, which constituted a rejection of Canaanite models of kingship and an acceptance of the notion that YHWH alone is king; (3) the acceptance of only a particular kind of king in Deuteronomy 17, which was a condemnation not only of Canaanite and Mesopotamian models of kingship but also the way monarchy turned out in Israel's history; (4) the recognition of YHWH alone as warrior and king in the age of Gideon and Jotham; (5) the strands in Judges and Samuel that reject the notion of kingship; (6) the alternative strands that were more favorable to kingship but nonetheless show the negative consequences of what happened when the Israelites got what they asked for; (7) the Chronicler's narration of Jewish history that highlights trust in YHWH alone over against normal political and military arrangements; (8) the suffering servant alternative offered by Isaiah 40-53, which Jesus appropriated; (9) the fall of the kingship due to the kings' failure to trust God alone for their national survival; (10) the abandonment of kingship as a vehicle of God's people's identity in the vision of Jeremiah; (11) the non-restoration of Israelite political independence in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah; (12) the witness of Esther and Daniel that faithful Jewish life can be lived under pagan kings; (13) the failure of the Maccabean project to achieve lasting success; and (14) Jesus' warning against the ruling ways of the kings of the nations, his projection of a different path for his followers, and his announcement of a kingdom that was unlike the monarchy of Israel and the nations. Several components of the Old Testament narrative that are important to Yoder's work but are missing in the limited account Yoder offers here include creation, Babel, Abraham, Exodus, and the Jeremianic commission. Thus to arrive at Yoder's full Old Testament narration it has been necessary to combine various relevant contributions of Yoder's wider corpus. Yoder also offers a partial Old Testament narration in "To Serve our God," in *Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 133-135.

## Yoder's Canonical-Directional Approach to Scripture

Yoder's reading of Scripture combines two distinct hermeneutical approaches: biblical realism and directional fulfillment. Broadly speaking, the former represents a particular stance toward various historical-critical issues raised by the biblical text and the latter has to do with how the Old and New Testaments relate to one another. In this essay, I use the term "canonical-directional" to summarize the particular way Yoder melds these two approaches together. The term "canonical" emphasizes Yoder's biblical realist tendency to work primarily with the final form of the canonical text. This means accepting each text as it stands and taking into account that it stands alongside other canonical texts that impact how it should be read. The term "directional" emphasizes that Yoder reads the Old Testament in terms of a trajectory that points to and finds its fulfillment in Christ. According to Yoder, exegetes need not find allegorical ways to read Christ into the text; the text is already inseparably caught up in God's work in history which finds its fulfillment in him.

A basic understanding of Yoder's canonical-directional hermeneutic is essential for appreciating his narration of the Old Testament and its relevance to ecclesiology. I therefore sketch Yoder's particular application of the biblical realist and directional fulfillment approaches to Scripture. Though I separate these two approaches temporarily for the purpose of analysis, Yoder blends them together seamlessly in his exegesis.

Biblical Realism

Yoder viewed biblical realism as an approach to Scripture that has spurred new trains of thought and raised new questions for theology.[5] By biblical realism, Yoder meant approaching Scripture with the best available tools for interpreting the author's original intention and trusting that all the texts in their canonical form will hang together and present a coherent message. Biblical realists see no need to protect Scripture's basic meaning from critical analysis, having nothing to fear from it. Nor do they perpetuate skeptical bias against the historicity of events in the text and excessive suspicion that authors and editors routinely committed pious fraud. They typically pay little attention to matters of alleged authorship and source documents and, instead, tend to the final form of the text as if it was the form bequeathed to us by the original authors.[6] Yoder may not have pioneered this exegetical approach, but he certainly championed it.[7]

Yoder's biblical realism should not be confused with naïve biblicism. Yoder argues that the biblical realist stance is a post-critical phenomenon: "What is at stake is not whether the Bible can be interpreted at a great distance without linguistic and hermeneutic tools, but whether, at those points where it is clear in what it says, we are going to let that testimony count rather than subjecting it to the superior authority of our

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[5] Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution: A Companion to Bainton* (Elkhart, IN: Goshen Biblical Seminary, 1983), 425. This work is a compendium of study resources based on taped lectures of Yoder's seminary course instruction. Brazos Press intends to publish a fully edited version of these course materials in 2009.

[6] Yoder's most detailed presentation of biblical realism is found in "The Message of the Bible on Its Own Terms," in *To Hear the Word*, 125-144. My brief summary here draws primarily from p. 128.

[7] In *Christian Attitudes*, 425, Yoder acknowledges his dependence on Piper, Minear, Cullmann, and Barth.

own contemporary hermeneutic framework."[8] Following Paul Minear, Yoder argues that biblical realism simply aspires to what has always been the scholar's highest goal: to allow the object under investigation to dictate the appropriate method of interpretation.[9]

Yoder's preference for biblical realism contributes greatly to his appropriation of the Old Testament for ecclesiology. Indeed, he sees many influential Old Testament scholars from a variety of faith traditions operating with similar sensibilities, including Walther Eichrodt, Gerhard von Rad, G. Ernest Wright, John Bright, and John W. Bowman.[10] Whereas some scholars appear to get lost in the process of seeking to unearth the events beneath the text, Yoder freely moves from text to text, paying careful attention to the continuities and discontinuities from one book to another. Similarly, since the New Testament freely appropriates the Old Testament Scriptures as its antecedent tradition, with no system-induced anxiety about violating dispensational boundaries, Yoder was able to see continuities between the testaments where others presume discontinuity. In thus granting the benefit of the doubt to the conceptual world of the texts as they stand, Yoder found himself standing under the text's judgment rather than presiding over the text in judgment. Rather than assume that modern sensibilities are always right, he presumed that God's people of old may have new light to shed on contemporary Christian issues, even ecclesiology.

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[8] Yoder, "Use of the Bible," in *To Hear the Word*, 81.

[9] Yoder, "Message of the Bible," in *To Hear the Word*, 143.

[10] Yoder, "Message of the Bible," in *To Hear the Word*, 129.

Directional Fulfillment

When engaging Yoder's reading of the Old Testament, it is particularly important

to note that he reads it directionally. In his Basel dissertation, Yoder traces this

directional approach to early Anabaptism.[11] Yoder later argues that it is a constitutive part

of the wider believers' church tradition:

> One of the marks of the "believers' church" heritage is that it sees movement
> within the canonical story, and therefore a difference between the testaments.
> Instead of a timeless collection of parabolic anecdotes for allegorical application,
> or of propositional communications ready for deductive exposition, the Bible is a
> story of promise and fulfillment which must be read directionally. The New
> Testament, by affirming the Hebrew Scriptures which Christians have come to
> call the Old Testament, also interprets them. Abraham and Moses are read
> through Jesus and Paul.[12]

Given Yoder's misgivings about allegorical appropriations of the Old Testament

and his preference for a more historical and directional approach, one does not expect

him to commend interpreting Old Testament figures the way he does at the end of this

quotation. After stringently arguing that we must read the testaments forward—not

backward—he beckons us to read earlier persons and events from the Old Testament in

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[11] According to Yoder, early Anabaptists argued for a directional reading of the Old Testament in the context of debates with Zwingli about the practice of baptism. Cf. *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland: An Historical and Theological Analysis of the Dialogues between Anabaptists and Reformers* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2004), 169-172. Cf. also Yoder, "The Hermeneutics of the Anabaptists," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 41 (Oct 1967): 306-308. Yoder did not believe, however, that Anabaptists were alone in reading Scripture directionally. Together with Richard Mouw, he issued a statement indicating that this way of reading Scripture is shared with the Reformed tradition. Cf. Richard J. Mouw and John H. Yoder, "Evangelical Ethics and the Anabaptist-Reformed Dialogue," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 17, no. 2 (Fall 1989): 132-133. Yoder's directional reading also contributes to his critique of systematic theology, which he believed seldom accounts for the movement from Old Testament to New Testament, as well as smaller movements within each testament: "We test our conformity to Scripture therefore not by asking whether we keep saying the same thing without change, but rather by asking a more difficult question: Is the way we keep moving in conformity with the way God's people were led to move in formative times," *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002), 373.

[12] Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 9.

light of later ones from the New.[13]  Can Yoder read Abraham and Moses in light of Jesus

and Paul without contradicting his commitment to reading Scripture forwardly? Yes,

because he affirms Scripture's unique promise-fulfillment structure. Not only do God's

dealings with Israel in the Old Testament pave the way for his people in the New

Testament but, since Jesus is the fulfillment of that toward which the Old Testament is

striving, Jesus also provides the interpretive key for discerning between Old Testament

developments that constituted genuine progress in the direction God was heading and

deviations that needed to be overcome.

Before coming to know Christ, one is in a position to read Old Testament texts in

their historical contexts and to restrain oneself from superimposing later questions and

doctrines onto those texts; only after knowing Christ is one able to evaluate what

developments, in their historical contexts, were progressing in the direction of Christ,

who is their fulfillment. This ability to evaluate various events in the canon in light of

later developments within that same canon is critical to Yoder's ability to narrate the Old

Testament in a cohesive way. This cohesion, for Yoder, is not limited to the canon. The

same canonical criteria that allow him to evaluate developments within Scripture enable

him to evaluate postcanonical developments, which leads to Yoder's broader ecclesial

historiography to which I turn after first illustrating Yoder's canonical-directional

approach to Scripture with two examples.

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[13] Yoder's insistence on *not* reading backward is seen more clearly in other essays. E.g., In "If Abraham is Our Father"(in *Original Revolution*, 100), Yoder says, after cataloging various deviant readings of the Old Testament, "All of the above views…begin to state the problem by looking *back* upon the Old Testament from the New…. But the story did not move that way, back over the Old Testament from the perspective of the New; it was rather a purposeful movement in the other direction."

Two Representative Essays

I now discuss two works that showcase Yoder's directional reading of Scripture and, in so doing, properly situate Yoder's appropriation of the Old Testament for ecclesiology.

(1) In chapter 5 of *Politics of Jesus*, "God Will Fight for Us,"[14] Yoder demonstrates his conviction that a directional reading of the Old Testament furnishes necessary background information for properly reading the New Testament.[15] Yoder begins by pointing out the alleged incongruity between the Old and New Testament portraits of warfare. Yoder must address such incongruity because it provides hermeneutical fodder for the kinds of apolitical readings of Jesus that he wrote *Politics of Jesus* to counter. If Jesus is God and God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, then how can God be anti-war in the one testament and pro-war in another? In chapter 1 of *Politics of Jesus*, Yoder makes clear that such questions beget multiple hermeneutical theories that render Jesus' ethical teachings politically irrelevant.[16] One such theory holds that, because the Bible's teaching must be consistent, Jesus must be addressing personal ethics, whereas the Old Testament addresses public ethics. Another theory holds that Jesus advocated an interim ethic that was rooted in his conviction that the world would

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[14] Yoder, "God will Fight for Us," in *Politics of Jesus*, 76-88.

[15] In "Use of the Bible in Theology" (in *To Hear the Word* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001], 74), Yoder shows why reading the New Testament over against Old Testament backgrounds does not stand in tension with his Christocentrism. His logic can be set forth in four statements: God is our ultimate court of appeal in theology; God is most fully revealed in Jesus; the New Testament comprises our most immediate collection of testimonies to the historical man Jesus; and the Old Testament is our primary document for understanding the assumptions, prerequisites, cultural backgrounds, and definitions of terms that are used in the immediate testimonies contained in the New Testament.

[16] Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, 4-8.

end within a single generation and that the failure of that end to come requires Christians to adopt a more realistic ethic that is better suited for the long haul.

In "God Will Fight for Us" (chapter 5 of *Politics of Jesus*), Yoder's case against apolitical readings centers on a canonical-directional reading of the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, Yoder does not find an abstract ethic of warfare, but a series of narratives demonstrating that the Israelites were formed to regard warfare much differently than the nations around them. Since the Exodus, God instructed the Israelites to believe that their deliverance from political adversaries lay not in their ability to fight effectively for themselves, but in God's miraculous provision. Yoder argues that this principle was operative not only in the defeat of Pharaoh's army, but in subsequent battles, like the defeat of the Amalekites and the conquest of the Promised Land. In all these cases, God delivers the enemy into Israel's hands. Having noted this foundational pattern, Yoder leaps forward to multiple passages in 2 Chronicles where Israel's kings perpetuated this conviction, at least some of the time, by relying upon God alone to defeat their enemies.[17] Noteworthy examples include God's miraculous deliverances of kings Jehoshaphat (ch. 20) and Hezekiah (ch. 32). In both cases, God turns Israel's enemies against each other, while the Israelites prayed and waited for God's deliverance. They thus stand in stark contrast to instances when Israel's kings were routed for trusting normal military means to secure their survival. Yoder wraps up his Old Testament narration after the exile, where he notes a similar reliance upon "God alone" in Ezra's refusal of a Persia-sponsored armed escort back to Jerusalem.[18]

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[17] 2 Chron 14:11; 16:7-9; 20:17; 20:29; and 32:8.

[18] Yoder, "God Will Fight for Us," in *Politics of Jesus*, 82-83.

Having rehearsed these prominent events in Israel's history, Yoder applies them to the first-century world of Jesus' original hearers:

> In the atmosphere of heightened apocalyptic sensitivity into which Jesus came, it was at least *possible* if not *normal* for those who were "waiting for the consolation of Israel" to see in these miraculous deliverances of the Old Testament story a paradigm of the way God would save his people now. When, therefore, Jesus used the language of liberation and revolution, announcing a restoration of "kingdom" community and a new pattern of life, without predicting or authorizing violent techniques for achieving his good ends, he need not have seemed to his listeners to be a dreamer; he could very easily have been understood as updating the faith of Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah, a faith whereby a believing people would be saved despite their weakness, on condition that they "be still and wait to see the salvation of the Lord."[19]

Yoder's message is clear: if Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament story, then there is no reason to assume he was not preparing his followers to regard their own triumph over enemies in ways consistent with that of God's faithful followers in the Old Testament. Though modern readers may be tempted to restrict Jesus' ethic to a strictly personal sphere or to write it off as an irresponsible approach to ongoing evil in the world, first-century Jews who were immersed in the Old Testament story would have seen it as a viable option with a long track-record in the political history of Palestine.[20] Likewise, if the Old Testament is God's preparation of a people for the way of Jesus, then there is no reason to suspect that how God is shaping his people in the Old Testament is incompatible with his self-revelation in Jesus. One is thus not finished interpreting an Old Testament passage until one sees how that passage, in its own historical context, points forward to the way of Jesus. According to Yoder's canonical-directional approach, the

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[19] Yoder, "God Will Fight for Us," in *Politics of Jesus*, 84.

[20] Yoder, "God Will Fight for Us," in *Politics of Jesus*, 86.

Old Testament informs our reading of the New while the New Testament simultaneously informs our reading of the Old.

(2) In chapter 4 of *Original Revolution*, "If Abraham Is Our Father,"[21] Yoder reinforces the canonical-directional approach of the aforementioned essay and goes beyond it in ecclesiological directions that are worth noting. He begins by highlighting the common assumption that the Old Testament basically portrays God and his people as those who glorify violence. Next he notes and critiques four ways scholars have sought to handle this apparent incongruity with the New Testament.[22] He faults each one for posing needless solutions to a non-problem that only appears to be a problem when one reads backwardly from the New Testament to the Old, as if the Old Testament points away from Christ, rather than forwardly from the Old Testament to the New, as if the Old Testament points toward Christ. Yoder then exemplifies the latter approach by emphasizing the "concrete historical anthropological meaning" of texts that allegedly glorify violence.[23] When read directionally from within their historical contexts, Yoder argues, such texts do not glorify violence but instruct God's people to rely upon God's provision for their safety in all situations.

Yoder illustrates this principle with a close reading of the Akedah, the near sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham.[24] According to Yoder, the point of this account is not that child sacrifice is a viable practice in God's eyes but that God's people, like Abraham,

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[21] Yoder, "If Abraham," in *Original Revolution*, 91-111.

[22] Yoder, "If Abraham," in *Original Revolution*, 92-100. He labels these approaches: new dispensation, shift of degree or concession to disobedience, pedagogical concession, and division of levels or realms.

[23] Yoder, "If Abraham," in *Original Revolution*, 100-107.

[24] Yoder, "If Abraham," in *Original Revolution*, 101-103.

must so trust in God's ability to fulfill his promises that they would risk obeying him even when he asks them to do what seems unlikely to succeed from their perspective. This point is obscured, however, when the Akedah account is read backwards rather than forward. From a backwards perspective, contemporary readers cannot help but be mortified by a father who is prepared to take the life of his son. Yet in Abraham's day this practice was quite common and was considered to be analogous to killing the firstborn of one's flock and offering the first fruits of one's crop. These were ordinary ancient near eastern religious rituals. What stands out in this account when read forwardly from within its historical context is that God previously promised Abraham that Sarah's firstborn would inherit the Abrahamic promise. Now God seems to be calling upon Abraham to jeopardize that promise by offering Isaac on the altar. Abraham's trust in God's miraculous provision against all odds was on trial, not his view of child sacrifice or paternal affection. Yoder then uses this example to illuminate Israel's YHWH war tradition. In their original contexts, the Old Testament accounts of Israel's battles were not intended to convey timeless principles about justified warfare, but to showcase that when the Israelites expressed radical faith in God's miraculous provision they flourished, whereas when they relied upon human military might they floundered.

Moreover, in this essay, Yoder exhibits his canonical-directional approach by showing how God began directing Israel away from warfare and bloodshed altogether within the Old Testament itself. God does so, according to Yoder, by stripping Israel of state structures that legitimated bloodshed on a limited basis and by reconfiguring Israel's posture in the world in such a way that shedding blood would serve no meaningful purpose for Israel. This canonical-directional movement has important implications for

ecclesiology. In Yoder's words, "Once one's own national existence is no longer seen as a guarantee of Jahweh's favor, then to save this national existence by a holy war is no longer a purpose for which miracles would be expected. Thus the dismantling of the applicability of the concept of the holy war takes place not by promulgation of a new ethical demand but by *a restructuring of the Israelite perception of community under God*."[25]

Yoder's canonical-directional reading does not trace the progressive development of a moral code to which Israel's social life must adjust; it traces an increasing awareness of how God is forming Israel socially, politically, and missionally that has important implications for morality. Thus Yoder sees development in Israel's self-understanding throughout the Old Testament as it perceives God to be opening and shutting certain doors to particular forms of communal expression. This progression stands in continuity with and, indeed, culminates in John the Baptist's scandalous statement that God could raise up sons for himself from stones. It is this trans-testamental trajectory that opened the door for Jesus and the Church's enemy-loving posture. Yoder concludes this essay saying, "Thus the very willingness to trust God for the security and identity of one's peoplehood, which was the original concrete moral meaning of the sacrament of YHWH warfare, is now translated to become the willingness or readiness to renounce those definitions of one's own people and of the enemy which gave to the original sacrament its meaning."[26] This article thus showcases Yoder's belief that a canonical-directional reading of Scripture both helps one understand Old Testament violence and reveals the

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[25] Yoder, "If Abraham," in *Original Revolution*, 108 (emphasis added).

[26] Yoder, "If Abraham," in *Original Revolution*, 110.

inseparable connection between the shape of the faith community and its ethical convictions and practices.

A comprehensive account of Yoder's approach to Scripture would have to take into account Yoder's doctrine of revelation, view of inspiration, notion of canonical authority, and communal approach to interpretation. Yet space does not allow for this and the topic at hand does not require it. Instead, I have focused on Yoder's canonical-directional hermeneutic and applied it specifically to his reading of the Old Testament. With comprehension of this hermeneutic in hand, one is better positioned to appreciate Yoder's unique narration of the Old Testament story. This narration is best appreciated in the context of Yoder's broader historical narration to which we now turn.

## Yoder's Six-Stage Ecclesial Historiography

Yoder narrates world history, from creation to the present, in a way that may be dubbed "ecclesial historiography." It is an *ecclesial* historiography because, for Yoder, both biblical and postbiblical history must account for the shifting shape of God's people in the world. It must do so not because history is an inexorable process to which God's people must simply learn to adapt, but because history is the medium in which God is forming his people so they, in turn, may be used by God to change world history. God's people, in Yoder's estimation, are nothing less than the bearers of history's meaning.[27] To situate Yoder's Old Testament narration within his overall ecclesial historiography is to confess that the Old Testament is itself primarily concerned with the nature and shape of God's people.

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[27] Yoder, *Christian Witness to the State* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 13 and 16-17.

In one place Yoder describes the Hebrew and Christian narrative as a single story from Abraham up until the present with two turning points: Jeremiah and Constantine.[28] In other essays he identifies Abraham,[29] David,[30] Jesus,[31] Justin Martyr,[32] and the Radical Reformers[33] as pivotal leaders who were instrumental in fundamentally altering the shape of God's people in this world. Though Yoder identifies seven pivotal figures, they represent only five dramatic shifts in overall ecclesial direction. That is to say, whereas Jeremiah marked a fundamental change in posture with reference to monarchy and palestinocentric existence, Jesus continued and fulfilled that trajectory rather than move in a fundamentally different direction. Similarly, to the extent that apologists like Justin Martyr began severing Christianity from its Jewish roots, they set into motion a chain of events that made possible the merger of Church and state represented by Constantine. As the Jeremianic stage is fulfilled in Christ, so the Justinian stage is fulfilled in Constantine. Consequently, Yoder's narration is comprised of six distinct stages in which each stage constitutes a fundamental change in direction from the prior stage. The six stages of Yoder's ecclesial historiography are as follows:

1. Pre-Formation of a People: from Creation to Babel
2. Formation of a People: from Abraham to Judges
3. Deformation of a People: from Monarchy to its Collapse
4. Re-Formation of a People: from Jeremiah to the Early Church
5. Re-Deformation of a People: from the Apologists through the Reformation

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[28] Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 8.

[29] Yoder, "Original Revolution," in *Original Revolution*, 27-28.

[30] Yoder, "To Your Tents," 346-353.

[31] Yoder, "Original Revolution," in *Original Revolution*, 28-33.

[32] Yoder, "It Did Not Have to Be," in *JCSR*, 43-66.

[33] Yoder, "Restitution of the Church," in *JCSR*, 133-139.

6.  Re-Re-Formation of a People: from the Radical Reformation through the Contemporary Free Church Tradition[34]

Like Lohfink, Yoder begins with a prefatory stage that we are calling *Pre-Formation*. This stage serves the important function of showing what transpired before God intervened in world history by forming a people and thus why God chose to do so. Though there are important differences in the ways Yoder and Lohfink narrate this second stage, both agree that Abraham marks the beginning of Israelite history proper and that from Abraham to Judges—*Formation*—God is working through one particular family group and shaping its life in a deliberate way that he intends to use as a blessing to the nations. The defining characteristic of this stage is that God's people must rely upon him alone for their existence and security.

In stage three, Israel abandons the posture of reliance upon God alone by asking for a king like the nations. Reluctantly, God gives them what they want, but not before warning them about the mistake they are making. Yoder's incisive criticism of this stage warrants the pejorative label *Deformation*. This stage lasts until the monarchy collapses, according to Yoder, under the weight of its own inadequacies. The monarchical model is replaced during the time of Jeremiah, thereby signaling a new and decisive stage: *Re-Formation*. During this fourth stage, God realigns his mission for Abraham's descendants by stripping them of national sovereignty and scattering them throughout the world in the form of minority witnessing communities. Jesus continues this reform and takes it to a new level with the inauguration of God's kingdom and the inclusion of the Gentiles. In

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[34] Those unfamiliar with Yoder's work may not catch the deliberate "Yoderism" that was employed in choosing titles for these stages. In "Christ the Hope of the World" (in *Original Revolution*, 148-154), Yoder offers a selective historiography of post-Reformation history that identifies various forms of Constantinianism under the rubric of neo-Constantinianism, neo-neo-Constantinianism, neo-neo-neo-Constantinianism, and neo-neo-neo-neo-Constantinianism.

Detailed

all their newness, however, the people of God whom Jesus equips and sends into mission stand in fundamental continuity with the Jeremianic turn insofar as they assume its diasporic posture and synagogue model of community.

At this point it is critical to note that the basic ecclesial model represented by the Jeremianic stage extends all the way through the New Testament and into the life of the early Church. It thus constitutes the proper context for New Testament ecclesiology and the consummated norm away from which later churches will fall. In Yoder's narration, this fall does not begin with Constantine as one might expect. Rather stage five, the *Re-Deformation*, begins with the Jewish-Christian schism, wherein early Christian Apologists like Justin Martyr began theologizing in such a way as to create a significant rift between messianic and non-messianic Jews, between Church and synagogue. This moment in history is important for Yoder because it marks the moment when Christians began breaking away from an Israel-like view of the Church.[35] An Israel-like view should have warned fourth century Christians from allying with world empires like Rome and re-appropriating monarchical structures like those that failed Israel so terribly in the past. Yet this warning went unheeded and the Jewish-Christian schism culminated in the Christendom merger. In this merger, Constantine and his successors wedded the Church to imperial structures resembling the original *Deformation* of God's people.[36]

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[35] For our purposes, one might say that it was the Jewish-Christian schism that made it possible for Christians to disregard the Old Testament as an indispensible ecclesiological primer.

[36] A more detailed account of this stage would have to address how, at this time, the Church was not a stable institution that could simply be wedded to an empire or any other institution. The Christian movement itself was quite diverse and its incorporation into Roman imperial structures began to impose a unity upon the Church that was not theretofore present.

Yoder's critique of Constantinianism is well-documented and need not be rehearsed here.[37] What is important for our purposes is that the debilitating Church-empire merger represented by Constantine stood virtually unchecked until the Reformation—although the Magisterial Reformers did not bring about the full ecclesial reform that was needed. Whereas they made great strides biblically and theologically, Yoder faulted them for stopping short ecclesiologically insofar as they preserved a strong relationship between the Church and the sword-bearing state.[38] The Reformation nonetheless paved the way for the final stage of Yoder's narration, *Re-Re-Formation*, which took concrete form in the Radical Reformation. The Radical Reformers, in Yoder's estimation, took the Magisterial Reformation to its logical ecclesial conclusions, including full separation of Church and state and insistence upon voluntary ecclesial membership through adult baptism. This Free Church vision has continued in various forms since the Radical Reformation, although Yoder would not deny and indeed affirms that this vision has existed in minority pockets since the early Church.[39] In the same way,

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[37] Craig Carter dedicates a full chapter of *The Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001) to Yoder's critique of Constantinianism (155-178). Representative of this critique are the following four essays in *Royal Priesthood*: "Peace without Eschatology" (143-167), "Let the Church be the Church" (168-180), "Christ the Hope of the World" (192-217), and "The Disavowal of Constantine: An Alternative Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue," (242-261).

[38] I would argue, perhaps more strongly than Yoder, that Luther's two kingdoms framework began separating Church and empire within the Christendom context and represented genuine movement toward a more complete separation. This being the case, we might say that the Reformation signaled the beginning of this new stage in ecclesial-historiography and that this stage culminates in the Radical Reformation in the same way that Jeremiah culminates in Jesus and that the Christian apologists' rejection of an Israel-like view of the Church culminates in Constantine. Yoder discusses Luther's two kingdoms framework briefly in "The Two Kingdoms," *Christus Victor* 106 (Sept 1959): 3-7.

[39] For a helpful overview of Yoder's Free Church vision, see Carter's *Politics of the Cross*, 181-205. Yoder himself spells out this vision in multiple works, including "The Believers Church: Global Perspectives," in *The Believers' Church in Canada*, eds. Jarold K. Zeman and Walter Klassen (Canada: The Baptist Federation of Canada and Mennonite Central Committee [Canada], 1979), 3-15; "The Free Church Syndrome," in *Within the Perfection of Christ: Essays on Peace and the Nature of the Church*, eds. Terry L Brensinger and E. Morris Sider (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 1990), 169-175; "The Jewishness of the Free Church Vision," in *JCSR*, 105-119; "The Nature of the Unity We Seek: A Historic Free Church

the Constantinian model has continued to endure and has manifested itself in a variety of ways up until the present time.

This essay is not the place to set forth the supporting evidence for the entirety of Yoder's narration or to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses.[40] The following two chapters flesh out only those stages that are pertinent to understanding how Yoder tells the biblical story—that is, stages one through four. It is important to note, however, that the full six-stage view sketched here shows that Yoder's ecclesiological reading of the Old and New Testaments ultimately finds expression in the Free Church ecclesiology of his Anabaptist background. For this reason, those not favorably disposed toward the Free Church tradition and/or suspicious of Yoder's narration of Church history might suspect that his ecclesiology unduly influences his reading of the Old Testament so as to legitimate itself. It is not possible to completely exculpate Yoder from this accusation. Yoder never claimed to be bias-free nor would he expect anyone else to be.[41] Rather, Yoder attempted to be forthright about his biases and to discipline them as much as possible by checking his reading against scholars of various Christian traditions.

Chapter 6 argues that Yoder's overall interpretation of the Old Testament story is supported at different points by the careful exegesis of Old Testament scholars of Free Church, Roman Catholic, and Protestant persuasion. The bottom line is that the kind of continuity Yoder traces between the direction of the biblical narrative and contemporary

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View" and "The Free Church Ecumenical Style," in *Royal Priesthood*, 221-241; and "Thinking Theologically from a Free-Church Perspective," in *Doing Theology in Today's World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, eds. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 251-265.

[40] Though this kind of evaluation may be necessary to determine the viability of Yoder's entire ecclesiological vision, it is not necessary for my more narrow purpose of learning how Yoder appropriates the Old Testament for ecclesiology.

[41] Yoder, *Christian Attitudes*, 10-12.

Free Church ecclesiology would be exactly what one would find not only if Yoder had read his ecclesiology back into Scripture but also if Yoder was right about the biblical trajectory and its implications for ecclesiology. It should be noted, however, that the ecclesiological framework offered in this essay does not purport to be exclusively Free Church in orientation, but ecumenical.

It remains now to spell out Yoder's Old Testament narration in terms of the four aforementioned stages and to spell out its implications for ecclesiology. Chapter 3 focuses on stage one, covering Yoder's narration of the primeval history recorded in Genesis 1-11. Chapter 4 completes stages two through four, covering Yoder's narration from the call of Abraham to the global scattering of God's people.

CHAPTER 3: YODER'S OLD TESTAMENT NARRATION: PRIMEVAL HISTORY

**Pre-Formation of a People: from Creation to Babel**

Yoder's Old Testament narration follows the canonical order and thus begins with Genesis. Though Yoder never sets forth his overall view of the events preceding Abraham's call in Genesis 12, which for Yoder marks the beginning of the formation of God's people, he engages Genesis 1-11 in numerous essays dedicated to contested ethical issues, including violence, capital punishment, feminism, ecology, cultural development, and the powers and principalities. With reference to these topics, Yoder expounds upon the early biblical narratives of creation, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the origins of civilization, post-flood pronouncements, and the city of Babel. Yoder's narration of these events is traditional in many regards, but distinct emphases also emerge that contribute significantly to his ecclesiology.

Prelapsarian Peace

Yoder nowhere offers a full-fledged theology of creation, nor does he supply a systematic overview of the foundational events of Genesis 1-2. He does, however, draw from these passages on multiple occasions for specific purposes. Yoder's narration of these events comes from such diverse angles that it is helpful to distinguish between three of them: polemical, exegetical, and speculative.

*Polemical Angle*

More often than not, when Yoder refers to creation he is not talking about the

creation narratives of Genesis 1-2 but a specific doctrine of creation that has long

permeated conversations about the sources of social ethics. In *Christian Witness to the*

*State*, Yoder describes this rival doctrine in terms of three fundamental convictions that

he seeks to challenge, which may be summarized as follows:

> 1. There are ethical standards, which are rooted in creation, that are both distinct
>    from Jesus and irreconcilable with his teaching and example.
> 2. These standards, which are distinguishable from those of Jesus, are both
>    knowable and morally binding.
> 3. These standards should govern the individual's life in the social realm and
>    should thus be enjoined upon every citizen by the statesman.[1]

Yoder identifies the Niebuhr brothers as articulate proponents of this creational doctrine.

H. Richard Niebuhr's Trinitarian approach acknowledges a Christological ethic of love

that applies in limited Christian contexts, a pneumatological ethic of Christian and

ecclesial experience that also informs the ethic of God's people, and a creational ethic

rooted in God the Father that is more general and thus applicable to all of God's

creatures.[2] In a similar vein, Yoder highlights the sharp distinction Reinhold Niebuhr

makes between a notion of justice that is rooted in creation—and thus binding upon all

men and enforceable by state violence—and an *agape* ethic that is revealed in Jesus

Christ and his cross.[3]

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[1] Yoder, *Christian Witness to the State* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 80-81.

[2] Cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 80ff., 114, 131; and "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Christ," *Theology Today* (October 1946): 371-384.

[3] Yoder, *Christian Witness to the State*, 79.

Yoder's responses to this formulation are numerous and need not be rehearsed here.[4] What is important for our purposes is to note that Yoder does not disagree that God's good creation reveals something about morality. Rather, he contests the assumption that an ethic rooted in God's good creation must be different than that of Christ. One way to evaluate this claim, Yoder suggests, is to consider the hypothetical scenario of a prelapsarian society where there is no sinful self-affirmation. Yoder asks, Would such a society require violence or retribution, thereby standing in tension with the peaceful ethic of Christ? His answer is no, and his reasoning is worth quoting at length:

> That there would need to be some kind of order is not debatable; but would this order need to express itself in either violence or vengeance? Since in this hypothetical paradise there would be first of all no intentional offenses and secondly no one selfishly demanding vengeance, the claims for the need for retributive justice are hard to conceive of. Likewise distributive justice in such a context would mean giving everyone his share, which everyone in Eden would accept as sufficient. Could *agape* mean more than this? If *agape* be defined as different from justice, in such a situation it could only mean giving up one's own share, not because of someone else's greater need but for the sake of suffering and sacrifice as ends in themselves. This, however, would be Hindu self-abnegation, not Christian self-sacrifice. Thus, a situation where *agape* would be different from justice cannot be conceived of apart from the Fall. We therefore stand by the claim that the only basis for justice, either as an idea or as a set of institutions, is the fallenness of men individually and socially. We can, of course, continue to conceive of natural law in the scientific sense of observed repeatability; but then the claim can no longer be upheld that justice in natural law is a moral norm competing for our loyalty with that of *agape*.[5]

Yoder describes this scenario as "hypothetical" because we lack a biblical account of extended social development in a prelapsarian world. If Yoder is right, however, appeals to creation order would be appeals to a prelapsarian creation that we would have

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[4] Yoder's *Politics of Jesus* was written partially to refute this claim (*Politics of Jesus*, *Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994]). A more concise article on this theme is "Creation and Gospel," *Perspectives—A Journal of Reformed Thought* 3 (Oct 1988): 8-10. The source from which I mostly draw here, however, is *Christian Witness to the State*, 81-83.

[5] Yoder, *Christian Witness to the State*, 83.

no reason to assume reveals an ethic other than that of Christ. Since we cannot reach

behind the Fall to apprehend the unmarred creation, Yoder suggests that we look to

Christ in order to grasp the true nature of things: "When the 'nature of things' is properly

defined, the organic relationship to grace is restored. The cross is not a scandal to those

who know the world as God sees it, but only to the pagans, who look for what they call

wisdom, or the Judaeans, who look for what they call power. This is what I meant before,

when I stated that the choice of Jesus was ontological: it risks an option in favor of the

restored vision of how things really are….The cross is neither foolish nor weak, but

natural."[6]

In Yoder's hypothetical scenario we also catch a glimpse of his doctrine of the

powers—a doctrine that permeates Yoder's theological project and is central to his view

of creation.[7] The identity of these powers is not clear in Scripture. The apostle Paul refers

to them differently in varying contexts as a way of discussing the unquantifiable and

uncontrollable forces that exert sometimes helpful, sometimes harmful influence on

human affairs. In Pauline texts, this term is used with reference to and in conjunction

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[6] Yoder, "Are You the One Who Is to Come?" in *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 212.

[7] Yoder spells out his exousiology in "Jesus and Power," ch. 8 of *Politics of Jesus*; *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, trans. Timothy J. Geddert (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), ch. 1; *Christian Witness to the State*, ch. 2, "Behold my Servant Shall Prosper," in *Karl Barth and the Problem of War and Other Essays on Barth*, ed. Mark T. Nation (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2003), 160-167; et al. Yoder did not presume to be pioneering a new doctrine of the powers (*exousiai*) but drawing upon what he perceived to be an emerging consensus among New Testament scholars, including Hendrikus Berkhof, G. B. Caird, G. H. C. MacGregor, and Markus Barth (cf. *Politics of Jesus*, 136). This list continues to grow in our time, especially due to the influence of Walter Wink. That Yoder was influenced by Berkhof's *Christ and the Powers* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1977) is evident in that he translated it into English.

with sister concepts like principalities, thrones, dominions, angels, archangels, elements, heights, depths, law, and knowledge.[8] In the scenario above, Yoder calls them "order."

What is important for our current purposes is to note how Yoder relates the powers to creation. He does so concisely in *Politics of Jesus*, saying, "All these structures can be conceived of in their general essence as parts of a good creation. There could not be society or history, there could not be humanity without the existence above us of religious, intellectual, moral, and social structures. *We cannot live without them.*"[9] It is important that Yoder locates the powers in the prelapsarian creation precisely because he does *not* locate the state there. For Yoder the state, by definition, is a sword-bearing institution. Yoder was not being novel in defining the state that way; it was common parlance in the discussions of which he was a part.[10] But, as we noticed in Yoder's hypothetical scenario, no sword was required prior to the Fall because sinful self-affirmation against others would not occur and the sword would therefore not be required to keep it in check. We have to await Yoder's narration of the Fall to appreciate his understanding of both the fall of these powers and the ambivalent state's precise origins. For now it is sufficient to say that even though Yoder categorizes the state as one of the powers, he does not regard the state, as such, as one of the *good* powers that existed before the Fall.[11] Though some powers were inherent components of God's good

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[8] For "powers" language in the New Testament, see Matt 24:29; Luke 12:11; Rom 8:38, 39; 13:1-4; 1 Cor 2:8; 15:24-26; Eph 1:20-23; 2:1, 2; 3:10; 6:12; Col 1:15-17; 2:15, 16; Titus 3:1; and 1 Pet 3:21-4:1.

[9] Yoder, "Jesus and Power," in *Politics of Jesus*, 143 (original emphasis).

[10] Yoder, *Christian Witness to the State*, 12, n 6.

[11] Why then have certain theologians mistakenly identified the sword-bearing state as one of the good orders of prelapsarian creation? Yoder suspects that they have been misled by Martin Luther. When Luther dealt with the state in his catechetical writings, he did so in the context of the Decalogue's command

creation, others were later accretions or metastasizations. Though some were created by

God through Christ, others were pioneered or engineered by humans.[12] Since not all

powers are the same, Yoder argues that God's people should relate to various powers on

a case-by-case basis.[13]

*Exegetical Angle*

Yoder offers extended exegesis of the early chapters of Genesis in only one essay,

"Generating Alternative Paradigms," which he delivered at a conference on

environmental ethics.[14] Yoder's exegesis begins with the Eden account in Genesis 2 and

continues through chapter 4 with its depiction of the first human civilization. At this

point, we are concerned only with Yoder's articulation of what life was like prior to the

Fall.[15] In most respects, Yoder's account is quite conventional. He notes that Eden

provides a holistic vision of the human situation in economic and political terms. Humans

came from the earth and were commissioned to work it. Vegetation supplied humanity

with both its food and its occupation. Humans were given responsibility within creation

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to honor one's parents. In narrating the government as an extension of one's family, Luther located it in the undefiled prelapsarian creation. Cf. Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, co-authored with Glenn H. Stassen and D. M. Yeager (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 79.

[12] J. Budziszewski misses this distinction in his assessment of *Politics of Jesus.* Cf. "Shapers of Evangelical Political Thought," in *Evangelicals in the Public Square: Four Formative Voices on Political Thought and Action* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 106. Budziszewski takes a statement Yoder makes about the good created powers in one place (142) and sets it against a statement about the state in another place (201), erroneously thinking to have caught Yoder in an obvious contradiction. This is one of many misreadings of Yoder in that article (e.g., his mistaken conclusion that Yoder denies the accuracy of Jesus' teachings, 88-19).

[13] Yoder, "Behold My Servant Will Prosper," in *Karl Barth and the Problem of War*, 165.

[14] Yoder, "Generating Alternative Paradigms," in *Human Values and the Environment: Conference Proceedings*, Report 140 (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, 1992), 56-62.

[15] Yoder, "Generating Alternative Paradigms," 57-58.

to name and order the animals, but this should not be understood as domination. The first garden was a hospitable place where humans could serve God and one another and where animals were not regarded as food but as friendly neighbors. Human well-being was connected to the environment, and so it is in humanity's best interest to carry out its service with care and integrity. For Yoder, the Genesis writer paints an idyllic picture of human harmony with creation and one another.

Noticeably absent from Yoder's garden account, when compared with more familiar narrations of Edenic life,[16] is a description of intimate communion between humans and God in the garden. This omission may reflect the absence of such concerns in the text or it may reflect the nature of Yoder's assignment, since he wrote this essay primarily to address environmental issues.[17] Nonetheless, Yoder notes that God placed a distinctive memorial to his sovereignty in the garden. He planted a tree that was designed to remind humans that the viceregal management he assigned to them was not absolute. By forbidding them from partaking of the tree of knowledge, God was reminding the humans that the charge they received and the order they were commissioned to keep was not theirs to change, but to administer.

*Speculative Angle*

Above we noted that Yoder's exegesis of Genesis 2 lacks a robust account of original communion between humans and God. He does, however, use language of divine-human communion in *Preface to Theology*, where he attempts to construct an

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[16] E.g., Preben Vang and Terry G. Carter, *Telling God's Story: The Biblical Narrative from Beginning to End* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 34.

[17] Note below that Yoder speculates about such communion elsewhere, though he does not do so on exegetical grounds.

alternative framework for discussing atonement.[18] In this discussion, which Yoder

confesses is entirely speculative and not biblical, Yoder surmises (a) that humans were

created for free communion with God and obedience in communion, (b) that humans

ruptured this communion with God by using their freedom to sin, and (c) that God has

since been striving to bring humanity back to communion and obedience without

compromising human freedom.[19] It must be noted, however, that Yoder's emphasis in

this section is not upon the nature of that original divine-human communion but upon the

freedom with which God endowed his creatures. For such freedom to be real, God must

also have provided for the possibility of human disobedience, which is why God placed

the forbidden tree in the garden.[20]

Yoder argues that this original freedom has far-reaching implications.

Immediately after stating that God is *agape* and that *agape* respects the freedom of the

beloved, Yoder explains the importance of human freedom:

> This last statement is the one solid point where no exceptions may be made. It is the
> starting point of theology, of history, of ethics, of church order, and of every realm
> where *agape* matters. *Agape* respects the freedom of the beloved even to lose
> himself or herself. The first revelation of *agape* was thus the creation of human
> freedom, and no theology or ethics that denies this freedom can be true.
> Universalism denies humanity's freedom to turn away from God; Constantinianism
> denies the freedom not to be a Christian; Monism denies humanity's real existence;
> and totalitarianism or utopianism denies the freedom of choice (and/or sin) in
> society. Each such system denies the problem it sets out to solve.[21]

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[18] Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002), 307-313. For a parallel account that is more detailed in some respects, see Yoder, "The Wrath of God and the Love of God," a lecture prepared for the Historic Peace Churches and I. F. O. R. Conference, Beatrice Webb House, England, Sept. 11-14 (Basel: Mennonite Central Committee, 1956).

[19] Yoder, *Preface to Theology*, 310.

[20] Yoder, *Preface to Theology*, 309.

[21] Yoder, *Preface to Theology*, 309.

This quotation demonstrates that, for Yoder, the original divine-human communion was not a matter of recreational co-habitation in shared paradisiacal space. Instead, Yoder is concerned with issues of rule and dependence. God so loves humans that he gives them space to freely choose independence from him. Communion is not about spatial proximity to God's presence, but genuinely free acceptance or rejection of God's reign. That Yoder is not concerned with divine-human social life in the garden is evident in how he does and does not narrate the Fall.[22]

Postlapsarian Plight

Yoder's narration of the Fall picks up where his account of creation leaves off: the presence of a tree in the midst of Eden from which God forbade Adam to eat. God placed only one limitation on human autonomy, and the humans transcended it by choosing the serpent's offer of godlikeness and unconditional sovereignty. The consequences of this choice were far reaching. Yoder discusses them in ecological, social, cosmological, and epistemological terms.

*Ecological Consequences*

God granted humans relative jurisdiction over the garden and prohibited them from partaking of only one tree. Since they endeavored to gain absolute God-like control, the first humans ate from that tree and watched what control they had slip from their hands. Yoder describes the implications of this choice in morbid terms: "What was a fertile garden with whose natural potential we could co-operate becomes a desert peopled

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[22] This point is evident in Yoder's assertion that the earthly life of Jesus is the model of what God meant free human communion with God to be, namely, "obeying God and loving others—even [one's] enemies—with God's love." Cf. *Preface to Theology*, 310-311.

by weeds and thistles, demanding burdensome labor before yielding any fruit. Death is the final verdict condemning the effort to break free of the divinely intended harmony. Dust returns to dust; our final link with the soil is that having refused to harmonize with it when alive, we are reabsorbed by it when dead."[23]

Not only is creation cursed in such a way as to disrupt co-creational harmony and to exacerbate human work, but the soil that was designed to sustain human life is forced against its nature to entomb human death. The author of Genesis graphically portrays this estrangement between humanity and creation in the account of Cain and Abel to be discussed below.

*Social Consequences*

Yoder's convictions about the social implications of the Fall are illustrated in two unpublished works in which he explores the change it brought in the relationship between men and women.[24] In these essays, Yoder advocates a primeval vision of social wholeness that is structured matriarchically.[25] Yoder's reasons for this vision may be summarized as follows:

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[23] Yoder, "Generating Alternative Paradigms," 58.

[24] Yoder, "You Have it Coming: The Cultural Role of Punishment, An Exploratory Essay," (Shalom Desktop Publications, 1995), ch. 6, available online at http://theology.nd.edu/people/research/yoder-john/documents/CHAPTERVI.pdf [accessed Feb 18, 2009]; and "Feminist Theology Miscellany #1: Salvation Through Mothering?" (April 1988), available in the General Papers section of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary Library in Elkhart, Indiana.

[25] Yoder claims that he is not original in advocating this position, but he does not cite anyone else who does. Cf. "You Have it Coming," n. 14.

1. Woman was made in a special creative act that fills a gap in the original creation, thereby crowning it.[26]
2. Man cannot live without the woman and relates to her in a unique dependency.
3. Edenic culture depends primarily upon what ancient Israelites would have recognized as women's work (gardening and gathering), not men's work (hunting and fighting).
4. The serpent approaches the woman not as the weaker or lesser informed human, but as the decision-maker. The man eats what the woman sets before him without questioning or resisting.
5. Since matriarchal culture represented wholeness, male domination is a fitting reversal (the Fall being a fall into patriarchy) that parallels the other reversals that followed from the Fall (e.g., the serpent's fall from wisest to most cursed animal and the soil's shift from life-giving to death-receiving).
6. The corrective for subservience to the man is a wholeness or salvation that entails the renewal of matriarchy through mothering (cf. 1 Tim 2:15). The pastoral critique of female domineering in 1 Timothy need not be considered a putdown since domineering does not truly restore what women lost the way that loving motherhood does.[27]
7. Traits we are taught to call feminine are closer to the life and style of leadership that Jesus and his followers advocated than those we are taught to call masculine.[28]

Here is not the place to evaluate Yoder's provocative reading but to note that, according to his narration, the Fall deeply impacted both the relationship between males and females and the specific form that leadership will take in a fallen world. That is to say, not only did womankind fall into subservience, but leadership itself fell into

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[26] That Eve was created to be Adam's "helper" (Gen 2:18-20) in no way indicates a position of subordination. The Hebrew word for "helper" (the nominal form of עזר) does not carry with it the same connotations as the English word. The next time this word appears, though in verbal form, God is the one helping (Gen 49:25). The next four times it appears in the Pentateuch in nominal form (as in Gen 2:18-20), the helper is still God (Exod 18:4; Deut 33:7, 26, 29). In this sense, a "helper" is someone who has resources that another lacks and is thus in a position to help the one who is lacking.

[27] The act of mothering not only raises the offspring that will combat the serpent (Gen 3:15), but it restores for the woman, at least in the case of her offspring, the morally effective governing role she lost over Adam: "Every manchild's life is formed in a time of absolute dependence upon a benevolent and omnipotent mother" ("You Have It Coming," ch. 6). I would add that the idea that mothering somehow equalizes male dominance is supported by 1 Corinthians 11:11-12.

[28] This should caution us against reading male domination models into Yoder's vision of primeval matriarchy. His vision of matriarchy does not entail ascribing to Eve the kind of authoritarian leadership styles that fallen men have embodied. Rather it ascribes to her the servant leadership modeled and taught by Jesus, Peter, and Paul (cf. "Feminist Theology Miscellany," 6-7).

dominance.[29] Though Yoder does not say so explicitly, this fall of leadership provides a

helpful canonical context within which to locate the fall of the powers, to which we now

turn.

*Cosmological Consequences*

In Yoder's hypothetical account of a more fully developed prelapsarian world, we

noted the important role that the powers would play in creation. They would provide a

basic framework of order for the increasingly complex social network that would

eventually emerge. Yet these powers never existed in such pristine form. Yoder explains:

"The creature and the world are fallen, and in this the powers have their own share. They

are no longer active only as mediators of the saving creative purpose of God; now we

find them seeking to separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:38); we find them ruling

over the lives of those who live far from the love of God (Eph. 2:2); we find them

holding us in servitude to their rules (Col. 2:20); we find them holding us under their

tutelage (Gal. 4:3). These structures which were supposed to be our servants have

become our masters and our guardians."[30]

The consequences of the Fall are cosmological for Yoder because of the cosmic

reach the Apostle Paul ascribes to these enslaving powers. As noted above, the apostle

speaks of them not only in political terms such as principalities, powers, thrones, and

dominions, but also in cosmic terms such as angels, archangels, elements, heights, and

depths. For Yoder, following Paul, the Fall is not simply an individual matter, an

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[29] This observation loses none of its force if we were to argue against Yoder, as I do in chapter 6, that the patriarchy resulting from the Fall constituted a fall from an originally egalitarian—not matriarchal—arrangement. Of course, Yoder might respond by pointing out that once leadership is redefined in matriarchal terms, as taught by and exemplified in Jesus, one is dealing with a fundamentally egalitarian vision anyway.

[30] Yoder, "Christ and Power," in *Politics of Jesus*, 141.

interpersonal matter, or even an intercontinental matter. The Fall has universal significance. In the context of Yoder's polemic, this meant that we must not assign to any extension of the created order—whether the nuclear family, the state, or the heavenly hosts—a creational priority over Christ.

*Epistemological Consequences*

Lastly, Yoder emphasizes that the Fall is epistemologically crippling. He is not so cynical as to suggest that no shred of God's original creation remains to be discerned by humans, although he has been interpreted as saying that.[31] On the contrary, he argues that the noetic effects of the Fall render humans incapable of reliably identifying which parts of the world, or of human experience as we know it, accurately reflect God's original goodness and intentions. In Yoder's words, "Of course we have access to the good creation of God. What we do not have is epistemologically reliable access which would permit us by looking at the fallen order or analyzing our words about it to know just what the created goodness is and how to disentangle it from the perversion and rebelliousness."[32]

Yoder here repeats his objection to notions that there is a created order to which we have access that possesses ethical standards that are different from Christ and by which humans may order society. Even if such standards existed, the Fall has so incapacitated human reasoning that we are incapable of discerning such standards

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[31] Yoder later regrets the clumsy language he used in "Christ and Power," in *Politics of Jesus*, 141, which led people to believe this. He does not tell us who leveled these charges at him. Cf. "Behold My Servant Will Prosper," in *Karl Barth and the Problem of War*, 163.

[32] Yoder, "Behold My Servant Will Prosper," in *Karl Barth and the Problem of War*, 163.

independent of special revelation.[33] Yet according to Yoder we need not construct an epistemological bridge to cross Lessing's proverbial ditch. In the person of Jesus, "the truth has come to our side of the ditch."[34]

*A Fall into Grace*

We need not wait for Jesus, however, to see God's grace at work in these narratives. An important part of Yoder's narration of postlapsarian developments is God's gracious intervention on humanity's behalf. God could have kept his prior pronouncement and responded to human sin with only death, but this is not how the story continues. Yoder describes what happens next: "After being thrown out of the garden and into mortality, humankind receives a renewed promise of survival. Man's work in the field will yield food although at the cost of sweat. To woman is given the promise of posterity although at the cost of pain. Life will continue under the conditions of history, or fallenness, but that it goes on under that judgment is still a divine promise."[35]

We see hints in this quotation at a theme that is important to how Yoder narrates God's interactions in human history, namely, God's gracious decision to turn humans' sinful choices toward their own good. That is to say, the starting point for God's redemptive response to human sin is often either the painful consequences of sin, as in the cursed soil and painful child-bearing, or the feeble responses to the disaster humans bring upon themselves as evident in the following accounts of Cain, Abel, and Lamech.

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[33] It should be noted at this point that, for Yoder, the Fall did not make human obedience in world history impossible so that every human action in history is marred. Yoder grants that it is possible for some actions to conform to God's will but notes that this possibility is not rooted in human capacities but in the work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Cf. "The Forms of Possible Obedience," in *JCSR*, 122-123, 130, n. 10.

[34] Yoder, "'But We Do See Jesus': The Particularity of Incarnation and the Universality of Truth," in *Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 46-47, 59, and 62.

[35] Yoder, "Generating Alternative Paradigms," 58.

Prediluvian Politics

Yoder's reading of the prediluvian narrative focuses primarily on three characters: Cain, Abel, and Lamech. His analysis of the events surrounding these men's lives is crucial to his appropriation of the Old Testament for ecclesiology because it is here that he begins to spell out the nature of the fallen human social order and the governing state in particular. Yoder's starting point is Cain's murder of Abel.

*Societal Estrangement*

Though Yoder acknowledges that the age-old tension between herdsmen and farmers lurks in the background of Cain's murder of Abel in Genesis 4, he attempts to root this tension in something more fundamental and more organically connected to the preceding chapters.[36] Prior to the Fall, the ground produced fruit liberally for human gathering and consumption. There was a peaceful and cooperative relationship between Adam and the soil. This changed with sin. Now the ground clings to its produce and humans must wrest their fruit from its tenacious clutches. The occupation of gardening, which Cain inherited from his father, sprouted from the soil of inter-creational disharmony. Yoder does not regard it sinful to participate in this fallen occupation; he acknowledges that it is necessary for human sustenance. It remains embroiled in ambivalence nonetheless.[37]

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[36] Yoder narrates these same events with different nuances in two essays: "Generating Alternative Paradigms," 58-59; and "Voice of Your Brother's Blood," in *He Came Preaching Peace* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985), 61-62.

[37] Yoder, "Generating Alternative Paradigms," 59.

Abel, on the other hand, represents a partial throwback to Edenic harmony.[38] Rather than struggle against the soil, he finds a way to cooperate with it—moving his flocks from place to place, taking from the soil what it freely gives, and circumventing the task of scratching away at it to get more. God favored Abel's offering not because God favors shepherds nor because Abel gave the *best* of his flock but because Abel's offering represented a life more in tune with God's original harmony. Both the offering and the life of the one submitting it represent the wholeness God intends for his creation. It is not that Cain had sinned by being a farmer and offering his produce; his offering simply did not smell as sweet due to the ambivalence of the entire process that produced it. Cain's sin is not his chosen profession but his choice to kill his brother rather than to acknowledge and accept that Abel was closer to God's created intentions than he was.[39]

The consequences of Cain's violence do not end there. The voice of his brother's blood cries out after having seeped into the soil thereby exacerbating the already unnatural relationship Cain had with that soil. Cain was therefore banished from the soil and forced to find his livelihood elsewhere, neither in the fields nor among the field-dependent flocks. Since he cannot be trusted with his brother's life, he cannot be trusted with fields and flocks.[40]

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[38] I say "partial" because Abel's occupation participates in the practice of killing animals (at a bare minimum to offer as a sacrifice)—a practice that God likely pioneered when he created skins for the naked humans (Gen 3:21). In Yoder's narration, however, disharmony with the soil is more fundamental to the narrative than the death of animals.

[39] Yoder, "Generating Alternative Paradigms," 59. A fitting analogy may be God's command that those with physical defects may not draw near to submit offerings to God (Lev 21:16-23). They are not prohibited by virtue of sin but because their bodies do not reflect the wholeness that God requires of his offerings. They are still his people and they continue to receive his provisions and blessings, but their offerings would nonetheless be compromised.

[40] Yoder, "Voice of Your Brother's Blood," in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 62. Yoder only mentions here Cain's strained relationship with the field. I am extrapolating that Cain's estrangement from

It is critical for Yoder to accentuate God's response to Cain's egregious offense. Having previously spared the life of disobedient Adam and Eve, God now spares murderous Cain who had no justifiable or even reasonable motive for killing his brother. God's justice does not immediately demand life for life. In fact, God seems entirely unconcerned with equal recompense. He only makes explicit to Cain that his relation to the soil is forever altered—that his actions have consequences with which he must learn to live. Cain fears that these consequences will not end simply with banishment from the soil. He fears the vengeful reflex of society.[41] Cain assumes that, independent of divine intervention, the wider world citizenry will be morally outraged at his conduct and will take it upon themselves to bring him to deadly justice. God shares Cain's concern both for Cain's sake and for wider society. He protects Cain and all future humans who commit such "capital offenses" by harnessing for his purposes the fear of vengeful retaliation that could be worse than the original offense incurred. The mark of Cain thus points to the circle of vengeance in which Cain finds protection.[42] God did not create this circle of vengeance; he used it to keep a bad situation from getting worse.

*Suspect Civilization*

Yoder sees the origin of the state in this vengeful societal reflex. Though no formal government existed at this time, the dynamic of deterrence toward which fallen humans gravitated without divine provocation is the underlying dynamic of the sword-

the flocks is also implied since, as noted above, Yoder deems shepherding a peaceful way of cooperating *with the fields* in a postlapsarian milieu.

[41] Cf. Yoder, "Noah's Covenant and the Purpose of Punishment," in *Issues and Applications*, vol. 2 of *Readings in Christian Ethics*, eds. David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 473.

[42] Yoder, "Voice of Your Brother's Blood," in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 62.

bearing state. The state is thus a fallen institution that springs from human efforts at self-preservation. As soon as this violent reflex arose among humans, God sought to chasten it by placing it under his jurisdiction. Because governing structures are predicated upon human sinfulness, God's people must always remember that such structures are fraught with ambivalence.

The dangerous potential of this reflexive deterrent is quickly realized in Cain's near descendent Lamech who claims vengeful protection for himself and escalates it beyond reasonable proportion (from sevenfold to seventy-sevenfold according to Gen 4:24). This is to be expected, says Yoder, because "the justified violence of government is always open to abuse. Just as the protection of Cain escalated into the brutality of Lamech, so the claims governments make to protect their citizenry tend to escalate into the serious menace of uncontrollable wholesale destruction."[43] This consistently realized potential for abuse does not, however, render the state useless to God's purposes. God orders the fallen state to accomplish relative good despite itself because people are better off with any kind of government—even a tyrannical one—than they are without one.[44] The sword-bearing state is thus another example of how God takes a human response to the consequences of sin and orders it to his purposes.[45]

In destroying Abel, Cain also destroyed the possibility of wholesome society. The security of society would have to be based on the fear of revenge.[46] Since it began with

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[43] Yoder illustrates this principal by pointing to the Vietnam War, "Voice of Your Brother's Blood," in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 61.

[44] Yoder, "Voice of Your Brother's Blood," in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 61.

[45] In "Let Every Soul Be Subject: Romans 13 and the Authority of the State," in *Politics of Jesus*, ch. 10, Yoder supports this conception of the state with careful exegesis of Romans 13:1-7.

[46] Yoder, "Voice of Your Brother's Blood," in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 60.

the shedding of innocent blood, humans may only know of themselves as social animals who are both guilty socially and insecure about their personal safety.[47] Furthermore, since the shedding of innocent blood immediately impacted the soil, humans find themselves time and again destroying the natural world in an effort to stabilize their toppling societies.[48]

Culture is equally skewed from the outset. Yoder points out that Cain was the first to *cult*ivate, that is, to cooperate with the land by adjusting to the soils and the calendar in order to develop a fruitful field.[49] But Cain was deemed an unfit cultivator since he soiled the soil with his brother's blood. Having been driven further and further from truly natural cultivation, he had little recourse but to take refuge behind city walls. Cain traded relative harmony with God's natural order for the urban center, which was the product of estrangement not growth and prosperity.[50] Yoder restates in contemporary categories what he believed these ancient stories assume: "Adam makes the transition from nature to culture; Cain from culture to war. Culture (whose root meaning, we remember, was agriculture), is already morally ambivalent. It is close to nature, but not natural. It scratches open the soil, wounds the breast of Mother Earth, in order to wrest sustenance from it…. It thus becomes the occasion for fresh sin and the multiplier of damages."[51]

After being banished from the soil, Yoder notes that Cain's descendants quickly yielded the basic elements of fallen history and culture: the protective threat of revenge

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[47] Yoder, "Generating Alternative Paradigms," 58-59.

[48] Yoder, "Voice of Your Brother's Blood," in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 62.

[49] Yoder, "Voice of Your Brother's Blood," in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 62.

[50] Yoder, "Voice of Your Brother's Blood," in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 59.

[51] Yoder, "Generating Alternative Paradigms," 59.

(the state), the city (civilization), the arts (Jubal's music), technology (Tubal-Cain's metallurgy), and Lamech's escalating vengeance (war).[52] All of these unfold from the first murder and all of them result from the estrangement with nature that began with Adam and multiplied with Cain and his descendants. Nothing to which humans apply themselves is free from sin's taint. There is thus no sphere or realm of life that is fundamentally trustworthy, beyond suspicion, and immune to examination in light of Christ.

<div align="center">Postdiluvian Providence</div>

*Life as Sacred*

In discussing capital punishment, Yoder extends his prediluvian interpretive trajectory as it plays itself out in God's postdiluvian pronouncement to Noah: "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life. Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind (Gen 9:3-6)."[53] Yoder's major concern with this passage is that it is often interpreted as the divine institution of capital punishment, as if God is commanding all human governments to incorporate the death penalty into their penal codes. Building on his exegesis of the Cain and Abel incident, Yoder points out that this passage is another instance in which God takes a fallen human

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[52] Yoder, "Generating Alternative Paradigms," 58.

[53] All Scripture quotations in this essay are taken from the NRSV.

response to sin's consequences and places it more fully under his jurisdiction. Ever since

Cain, humans had been executing murderers and deterring would-be murderers through

the threat of vengeful retaliation. Already God had affirmed the sanctity of human life by

reining in retaliation and minimizing its abuse. Yet humanity rejected these divine

limitations and, following Lamech's example, fostered a culture of violence (Gen 6:11-

13) that escalated to the point of warranting the great deluge of Genesis 6-9.

God's response, in Genesis 9, is to place further restrictions upon human

bloodshed by claiming that all blood belongs to God alone and by identifying every act of

bloodshed, both human and animal, as a ritual or sacrificial act. Yoder's precise language

here has significant implications for his understanding of YHWH war, which is

extremely important to Yoder's ongoing Old Testament narration. He explains:

> To kill animals for food is not like picking fruit from a tree, pulling turnips from a garden, or cutting wheat in a field. It is an interference with the dynamics of animal life, represented by the flow of blood through the body, which humans share with the animal world. Every killing is a sacrifice, for the life of the animal, represented by its blood, belongs to God. To kill an animal is a ritual act; the blood belongs not to the killer but to God. There is no "secular" slaughtering of animals in ancient Israel. The blood of the animal is given to God by being sprinkled on the altar or poured out on the ground. The act of eating that meat is an act of communion with God. The provision for shedding the blood of a human killer is part of the same sacrificial worldview.[54]

By advocating such a high view of the sanctity of animal blood—so high that

every animal slaughter is a ritual act of sacrifice—the writer of Genesis is constructing a

powerful *a fortiori* argument for the sanctify of human life. If animals, who were not

created in God's image, are to be killed only under carefully prescribed divinely-ordained

circumstances, how much more ought human bloodshed fall under divine jurisdiction.

We will return to the application of this principle to the phenomenon of YHWH war in

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[54] Yoder, "Noah's Covenant," in *Readings in Christian Ethics*, 475.

chapter 4, but note for now that this protective view of human life stands in fundamental continuity with God's life-protecting response to Cain's murder of Abel and is confirmed by the trajectory Yoder sees played out in Torah legislation and beyond.[55]

*Babel as Blessing*

Yoder's interpretation of the Babel account of Genesis 11 serves as a hinge between the Pre-Formation and Formation stages of God's people.[56] The hubris involved in the people's attempt to reach the heavens echoes Eve and Adam's choice to eat the forbidden fruit in order to become like God. The grace God shows in scattering his people from Babel (ending their self-injurious architectural unity in rebellion) anticipates God's gracious sixth-century scattering of the Jewish people to Babylon (ending their self-injurious monarchical unity in rebellion). Yoder is thus traditional in how he narrates the human motives for building the city and innovative in how he narrates the divine motives for scattering the people and confusing their languages.

Yoder's primary contention is that readers should not assume that God is only scattering the people as a form of punishment. Nowhere does the text say it is punishment. It is only punishment if one presumes that monolingual centralized existence is in the people's best interest. Yet it was God's good intention, as stated in the beginning (Gen 1:28) and reaffirmed after the flood (Gen 9:7), that humans would scatter and fill the earth. This is precisely what the people seeking to make a name for themselves were

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[55] E.g., cities of refuge protect innocent killers, God gives specific instructions as to when a death is authorized, and YHWH war closely approximates the practice of sacrificially killing one's own kin— even an entire town—in cases of idolatry (Deut 13:1-16). Cf. "Noah's Covenant," in *Readings in Christian Ethics*, 475.

[56] Yoder's reading of the Babel narrative first appeared as "Meaning after Babble: With Jeffrey Stout beyond Relativism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24, no 1 (Spr 1996): 127-128. Yoder further refined his reading in "See How They Go," in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* [hereafter *JCSR*], eds. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 188-190.

trying to avoid (Gen 11:4) and what God assured would happen by confusing their speech (Gen 11:7-9).

Yoder reinforces this interpretation by reading Genesis 11 against the background of the canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is in Babylonian exile, Yoder argues, that the Jews first recognized texts like Genesis as formative for their identity.[57] That being the case, Yoder considers how dispersed Jews may have understood this account. He suspects that the gracious divine scattering of Genesis 11 would have encouraged sixth-century Jews to see God's hand at work in their own scattering from Jerusalem. They would look to the Jeremianic commission—to seek the welfare of the cities to which they had been sent (Jer 29:7)—as encouragement to embrace this new providential arrangement. Furthermore, in using this account to set up the calling of Abraham from Ur (Babylon), in the following chapter, the canonical editor encourages his readers to see humanity's scattering as directly connected to the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham.[58] God first scatters the nations throughout the earth, next forms a people through whom he intends to bless all nations, and then scatters his people to bless those nations on their own turf. Again, Yoder sees God's grace at work when others see only punishment and, again, he sees God meeting humans at their point of sinful disobedience and redirecting them toward his own purposes for their good.

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[57] Yoder, "See How They Go," in *JCSR* 189, cf. 185.

[58] This editorial intentionality is strengthened by the fact that, even though Abraham actually received his calling while in Haran (Gen 12:4), far north of the heart of Babylon, the text stresses his origins in Ur, the heart of Babylon (Gen 11:31 and 15:7).

**Recapping Yoder's Primeval Narration**

Yoder's primeval narration is true to his biblical realist approach. It is entirely unconcerned with issues of historicity, scientific facticity, and original source identity. Instead, Yoder identifies in these familiar chapters poignant vignettes on the sanctity of life, revealing etiologies of human power structures, and unexpected cameos of God's gracious redirection of human sinfulness. For Yoder these stories demonstrate not only *why* God needs a people, but how *not* to be God's people. They therefore serve as a foil to the kind of people God is shaping throughout the biblical story.

These accounts of human dysfunction warn those who would be God's people not to mistake the created order for the world as we know it apart from Christ; not to covet autonomy from divine sovereignty; not to trade social and ecological harmony for dominance and exploitation; not to forge a functional, fear-filled society in the crucible of envy, bloodshed, and retaliation; not to confuse the old ambivalent order by which God maintains fallen society with the new providential order he uses to redeem it; and not to construct an enduring name for ourselves on the shaky foundation of seemingly unlimited human potential.

Just as important as the warnings these stories issue concerning dysfunctional peoplehood are the lessons they teach about God. God does not override the human capacity to corrupt his good creation; he graciously redirects humanity's feeble efforts to secure and sustain livable space in this world. More specifically, a fourfold pattern emerges in Yoder's telling by which human sin disrupts God's created harmony, all creation suffers as a result, humans respond to this suffering in particular ways, and God intervenes to spare humans from their own distorted responses. Yoder points out that

God's response to human disorder is not one of angry punishment, as routinely assumed, but of gracious redirection.

Each step of the way, God is reversing and braking and turning a human race that is barreling out of control—a race that is no people because it lacks the capacity to recognize authentic peoplehood. It is in this context that God calls Abraham. God eases off the brakes and steers his creation in a fundamentally new direction. This new direction does not entail tightening the divine grip on humanity by appointing agents of judgment and control throughout the earth. Humans already have structures that function this way. Though such structures are sufficient for the task of limiting chaos and maintaining a basic sense of order, they are powerless to produce the holistic shalom that God intends. God has a different solution for bringing global harmony and peace. His chosen people are that solution.

CHAPTER 4: YODER'S OLD TESTAMENT NARRATION: ISRAEL'S HISTORY

**Formation of a People: from Abraham to Judges**

Yoder's account of the formation of God's people may be likened to three phases

of human development. The call of Abraham marks the conception of God's people, the

Exodus from Egypt marks their parturition, and the transition into Palestine marks their

maturation. Yoder's basic narration of these events does not differ significantly from that

of most scholars. What stands out, however, is the paradigmatic significance he attributes

to these events for the ongoing identity of God's people. For Yoder, how God chose

Abraham, how he delivered the Israelites from Egypt, and how he transitioned them into

Palestine were not incidental; they were central to the kind of people he was shaping both

them and the Church to be.[1]

Conception of God's People

Conception is an apt metaphor for this initial phase of Israel's existence because

Yoder agrees with most scholars that, canonically-speaking, God's people did not truly

exist as a distinctly identifiable people until the Exodus from Egypt. Yet, undoubtedly,

the book of Genesis narrates the calling and pilgrimage of Abraham and his family as

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[1] In no single essay does Yoder speak extensively about the person of Abraham and his significance for the biblical narrative as a whole. Instead, Yoder discusses Abraham briefly in countless essays as a foundational figure for Israel and the Church's self-understanding. E.g., "If Abraham Is Our Father," 91-112, "Let the Church be the Church," 122, and "Original Revolution," 27-28, in *Original Revolution* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998); "Primitivism in the Radical Reformation: Strengths and Weaknesses," in *Primitive Church in the Modern World*, ed. Richard T. Hughes (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), 80-81; and "Why Ecclesiology Is Social Ethics," in *Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 115-116.

foundational to Israel's self-understanding. Moreover, this pilgrimage was not merely a

spatial trek; it was a journey from one way of being in the world to another. [2]

*Out of Babylon*

For Yoder it is important to note where Abraham's journey began: "Abraham was

called to get up and leave Chaldea, the cultural and religious capital of the known world

in his age, to go he knew not where, to find he knew not what."[3] Abraham's story picks

up where the Babel account left off, the heart of Babylon where the people of the world

sought to make a name for themselves by disobeying God's command. Like those

previously scattered, God now sends Abraham out of that cultural center, out of that place

where truly impressive empires have sprouted and flourished, out of the place where

civilization seemed most likely to succeed and to make a name for itself.

To be called out of this particular plot of land was to be called out of a relatively

secure social network, political affiliation, and holistic lifestyle and worldview. In

keeping with his canonical-directional reading of biblical and world history, Yoder

interprets Abraham's calling over against the societal context out of which he was called:

> Primal religion assumes the total known community as the bearer of the meaning
> of sacral history: whether it be the whole village, the tribe, the kingdom, or even
> the empire. The sacralization of life in primal cultures binds and unifies along
> every axis of possible differentiation. The crown and the cult reinforce one
> another. The agricultural is not separated from the military, the government from
> the land; the regime is not distinguishable from the people nor any of the people
> from other people. With the call of Abraham that changes. A part of the whole
> creation is separate from the whole on the ground not of its intrinsic qualities but
> by the peculiarly selective wisdom of a distinctly identifiable God.[4]

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[2] Yoder, "Biblical Roots of Liberation Theology," *Grail* 1 (Sept 1985): 59.

[3] Yoder, "Original Revolution," in *Original Revolution*, 27.

[4] Yoder, "Why Ecclesiology Is Social Ethics," in *Royal Priesthood*, 115.

In calling Abraham out of Babylon, God was calling him out of the apex of human power politics. Human civilization took off from the first murder, and Babylon had come to represent human dependence upon governmentally-organized violence. Such dependence not only dictated the military needs of a given civilization but it penetrated deeply into its economics, religion, and posture toward other peoples (who could only be regarded as alien competitors for scarce resources). Though God utilized society's vengeful reflex to keep order throughout the earth, it was not his final word or ultimate solution to the human predicament. A solution that would truly transcend the limitations of organized human self-interest would have to be built on a fundamentally different foundation. The solution would have to move beyond Babylon.

*Into a Peculiar People*

The change in world history that God envisions through Abraham is neither a change in rulership over Babylon nor a mere territorial shift away from Chaldea; it is the creation of a new world of possibilities. Elsewhere Yoder describes this shift in revolutionary terms: "This is the original revolution; the creation of a distinct community with its own deviant set of values and its coherent way of incarnating them. Today it might be called an underground movement, or a political party, or an infiltration team, or a cell movement. Then they were called 'Hebrews,' a title which probably originally meant, 'the people who crossed over.'"[5]

If the world is to be blessed by Abraham's descendants, these descendants will have to build a new society on a fundamentally different kind of foundation: faith in YHWH alone. This foundation was the primary meaning of God's testing of Abraham in

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[5] Yoder, "Original Revolution," in *Original Revolution*, 28.

Genesis 22. As noted in chapter 2, Yoder argues that when God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, he was not testing Abraham's ethic of child-sacrifice but gauging his faith in God alone.[6] If Abraham cannot trust God with the life of Isaac, then offspring with an Abraham-like faith will not be able to relinquish trust in sword-backed governing structures for their security. But if Abraham can leave Babylon and its securities behind, then God will fashion him into a people like no other—a separated sociology—a people with something worth contributing to a world of would-be Babylons.[7] As Yoder's narrative unfolds, it becomes obvious that this separation from the nations was not intended to be permanent. God calls his people *out* for a short while so he may later send them *in* for the long haul.

God's solution to the global problems of Genesis 1-11 is thus the formation of a particular people with a peculiar sort of trust in its God. According to Yoder, Israel's most fundamental contribution to human history is this unique, God-trusting way of being in the world. When God later sends Jesus it is not to replace this people, as if God's strategy of working through a people had failed, but to reform that people and recalibrate its life so it might continue its mission and truly accomplish God's purpose as revealed to Abraham.

Though the details of the common life of this trusting peoplehood are not laid out in Abraham's time, the big picture is largely in place. God's people would have to forsake the heart of Babylonian imperial culture, migrate toward an unbuilt city, follow the God who graciously calls them irrespective of their own intrinsic qualities, and trust that this God would be their security and would use them in their particularity to

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[6] Yoder, "If Abraham Is Our Father," in *Original Revolution*, 100-103.

[7] Yoder, "Primitivism in the Radical Reformation," in *Primitive Church*, 80-81.

accomplish for the world what made no sense for a minority group like them to accomplish.[8] In Abraham, God therefore established a powerful trajectory for his people. Throughout the story they will deviate from this trajectory by getting drawn into the imperial mindset, but when they do so it only leads to their demise.

<div align="center">Parturition of God's People</div>

The delivery process is an apt metaphor for the Exodus account in many regards, including the birth of independent Israelite identity, the departure from the incubatory Egyptian womb, the passage through the waters of the Red Sea, and the dependence on parental nourishment for sustenance.[9] Yet this fitting metaphor is not as important to Yoder's narration as are the implications for Israel's identity of leaving Egypt and entering covenant. In these two events, the nascent nation experiences corporately what Abraham experienced individually. To become God's people they would have to forsake the security of high Egyptian civilization and embrace the particular way of life set before them in Torah.

*Out of Egypt*

Yoder's most in-depth engagements of the Exodus from Egypt take place in the context of conversations with liberation theology.[10] Though Yoder is sympathetic to

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[8] Yoder, "Primitivism in the Radical Reformation," *Primitive Church*, 81; and "Let the Church Be the Church," in *Original Revolution*, 122.

[9] Accenting this birth metaphor are multiple child-related themes that paved the way for the Exodus event, including legislated infanticide, heroic midwives, protected babies, and firstborn plagues and dedications.

[10] Yoder, "Biblical Roots of Liberation Theology," 55-74; "Exodus: Probing the Meaning of Liberation," *Sojourners* 5 (S 1976): 26-29; and "Exodus and Exile: The Two Faces of Liberation," *Cross Currents* 23, no. 3 (Fall 1973): 297-309.

many aspects of liberation theology, he rejects the tendency among some liberation

theologians to make "Exodus" the primary biblical image for responding to a dominating

imperial power. He argues instead that a careful reading of the Exodus account does not

support many contemporary manifestations of the liberation project—particularly those

that encourage minority groups to use violence to overthrow an oppressive regime. Yoder

then offers a corrective narration containing five components of his view of this key

event in Israel's formation. They may be summarized as follows:[11]

1. The Exodus was not a program but a miracle. Israel did not pool its military
   resources in order to defeat its oppressors. God did all the fighting and, like
   Abraham, their role was to walk out in faith into uncertainty.
2. The Exodus was not a takeover but a withdrawal. The Israelites made no
   attempt to assume control of Egyptian territory. They left Egypt behind and
   submitted to the control of another Sovereign.
3. The Exodus was not a beginning but a culmination. The Israelites already
   shared a sense of peoplehood in Goshen. They were enslaved together and they
   cherished common memories of ancestors like Abraham and Sarah.
4. The Exodus was only the beginning. The Israelites were not freed from
   Pharaoh for freedom's sake. They were freed to form a community under the
   law of its God. The Exodus paved the way for a particular form of covenant
   commitment that furnished their liberation with its most fundamental motive
   and meaning.
5. The Exodus was an exception. Only once did God overcome an imperial
   overlord to achieve national independence for his people. On multiple
   occasions, however, God instructed his people to accept subjection under
   foreign rule and to seek the good of their host nation within their minority
   status (e.g., Jeremiah, Joseph, Daniel, and Mordecai).

Yoder's critique of certain forms of liberation theology, as such, is not our

primary concern. What is most important for our purposes is to note how, according to

Yoder's correction, God was forming his people by delivering them from Egypt in the

particular way he did. Central to Yoder's narration of Israel's birth is the fact that God

himself won deliverance for the Israelites. Yoder points out that "every portion of the

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[11] Yoder, "Exodus and Exile,"299-307; and "Exodus: Probing the Meaning of Liberation," 26-29.

Exodus account, difficult to interpret at other points, is clear in the report that the Israelites did nothing to bring about the destruction of the Egyptians."[12] This "do nothing" posture was not incidental according to Yoder; it was Israel's corporate baptism into dependence upon YHWH alone—not human military might—for national security. Yoder is keen to stress that the Exodus was exceptional in the way that God overpowered Israel's enemies to gain independence for his people but normative with respect to Israel's need to trust God and not human might for deliverance and ongoing security. The Exodus did not make the Israelites more confident in their collective human potential or more effective in their military prowess; it made them more aware of their dependence upon YHWH. This particular trajectory continues, according to Yoder, throughout the Old Testament narrative.

*Into Covenant*

Reliance upon God alone was not simply a matter of national security. God called the Israelites to rely upon him in all aspects of life. As noted above, the Exodus was not primarily deliverance from but deliverance for. In Yoder's words, "Liberation is *from* bondage and *for* covenant, and *what for* matters more than *what from*."[13] The biblical narrative is not the story of how God consistently intervenes in world history to deliver any and all people groups who find themselves in situations of extreme oppression. It is the story of how God delivered one people from one particular situation of oppression in order to shape its life according to his will so that its life may be a blessing and witness to

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[12] Yoder, "God Will Fight for Us," in *Politics of Jesus*, *Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 77.

[13] Yoder, "Exodus and Exile," 304 (original emphasis).

all nations. Unfortunately, Yoder did not write extensively on the nature of God's

covenant with Israel and the central role Torah played within it. We are, however, able to

paint a basic portrait of Yoder's view of these matters based on his focused engagement

of a specific passage within Torah, which he interprets in light of the wider legal corpus

and the role it plays in the overall biblical narrative.[14]

The relevant passage is Exodus 20:13, the Sixth Commandment, which forbids

killing.[15] Yoder advocates a contextual reading of this command. Consistent with his

canonical-directional hermeneutic, he argues that it is best to read this command in light

of what has happened historically and canonically both before it was given and after it

was received. Yoder offers this hermeneutical approach as an alternative to readings that

treat this command as a timeless principle and fail to notice some of its intended

meaning. Two aspects of Yoder's contextual reading require further comment.

(1) Yoder notes that this passage belongs to the Decalogue (Ten Commandments)

as a whole, which stands canonically as "the central event toward which the escape

through the sea and the wilderness wanderings were leading."[16] As such, its laws should

not be regarded as rules to live by in order to avoid punishment or to receive reward.

Rather, they are God's "gracious provision of a life form of grateful response."[17] As a

"life form," Torah is much more, in Yoder's estimation, than a set of legal parameters. It

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[14] Torah's teaching on jubilee is an additional theme that is important to Yoder's work. Yoder is more concerned, however, with the form this practice took in the ministry of Jesus than he is the role it played in ancient Israel's life. For this reason, it is left out of the current discussion. Cf. *Politics of Jesus*, 28-33 and 60-75.

[15] Yoder, "'Thou Shalt Not Kill': Exodus 20:13," in *To Hear the Word* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 39-46.

[16] Yoder, "Thou Shalt Not Kill," in *To Hear the Word*, 40-41.

[17] Yoder, "Thou Shalt Not Kill," in *To Hear the Word*, 42.

is the way of life which God graciously entrusted to the Israelites for their own benefit.

Israel's proper response is to thankfully accept this trust and to live in accordance with it.

It is as a community conformed to this particular way of life that God intends to use

Israel as his instrument of blessing to the nations, in keeping with his promise to

Abraham.

(2) Yoder interprets this command in the wider context of the Old Testament's

teaching on bloodshed. He recalls how God sought to limit bloodshed first by protecting

Cain in Genesis 4 and then by placing all lifeblood under his jurisdiction in Genesis 9.

During that time, God made use of the societal reflex of clan-based blood vengeance to

guard the sanctity of human life. However, now that Israel is becoming a people and now

that God's plans for the social shape of his people are taking concrete form, the clan-

based vengeance system may be transcended. Yoder describes the necessary connection

between the shape of God's people and content of God's decrees as follows:

> This centralizing of life's protection in the covenant as a new political context fits
> with the struggle to make Israel a community of judge-mediated law, rather than
> prolonging into the settled life of national Israel the simple clan-based retribution
> patterns of an earlier culture. This is why it was fitting that that high voltage threat
> of the lightning on the mountain should be invoked to reinforce the reservation of
> retributive bloodshed to others than the next of kin. The very meaning of
> peoplehood under JHWH is that it widens the borders of blood safety from clan to
> people.[18]

According to Yoder, God is not simply reading from an eternal script of divine

decrees pertaining to bloodshed; he is advancing his purposes in the world by giving

concrete social form to a set-apart people through whom he intends to bless all nations.

Now that God's plan demands a people with a particular way of life occupying a

particular plot of land during a particular era of world history, we see laws put into effect

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[18] Yoder, "Thou Shalt Not Kill," in *To Hear the Word*, 43.

pertaining to bloodshed (and much more) that would have made no sense prior to the

social developments in the life of God's people that made such laws possible.

Though the laws about killing in Torah continue a trajectory that began with

God's protection of Cain, they do not consummate it. The intended trajectory does not

culminate in the Sixth Commandment, according to Yoder, but in the kingdom of God

revealed in Jesus. Yet the kingdom of God will not follow immediately after the giving of

the law. According to Yoder's narration, God has further plans for Israel's development

even before sending Jesus. Yoder makes explicit such ongoing development within the

Old Testament: "The sacredness of life as belonging to JHWH alone was defended

initially by blood vengeance, then defended better in the Decalogue by reservation to the

judges, then progressively still better (as in Numbers 35) by various kinds of mitigation,

and still more from the age of Jeremiah to that of Akiba through the abandonment by

Jews of the structures of civil justice."[19] To the extent that God's plan to bless the world

through a particular people will continue to advance until it finds fulfillment in God's

kingdom, God will continue to uphold the sanctity of human life and his jurisdiction over

all life in ways that are appropriate to the particular communal forms to which he calls his

people during particular times.[20]

## Maturation of God's People

In Yoder's narration, Joshua picks up where Moses left off. Whereas Moses led

the people out of slavery and into the wilderness, Joshua took them from the wilderness

and into the Promised Land. The events surrounding this occupation demonstrate that

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[19] Yoder, "Thou Shalt Not Kill," in *To Hear the Word*, 45.

[20] As Yoder's narration unfolds, it will be clear that God's plan to bless the world through a people does not always advance in a straight or forward-moving line.

God's commitment to raising the Israelites as people who trust him rather than human power was neither a fluke nor a temporary strategy for an underdog nation seeking to escape the clutches of an imperial overlord. Rather, trust in God over and against military might was supposed to be a constitutive part of Israel's genetic code from the beginning. This requisite trust manifests itself in two ways that are important for Yoder's narration: the kingship of YHWH and the wars of YHWH.

*Kingship of YHWH*

For Yoder, YHWH's kingship is concretely expressed in the manner in which leadership is shared among his people. Most important to Yoder's narration are the rather flexible leadership structures discussed in Deuteronomy.[21] Pre-monarchical Israel was guided by a plurality of offices, including judges, elders, priests, and prophets.[22] Yet none of these leaders united all aspects of Israel's social constitution under a single human office. Each leader was accountable partly to the wider community (Deut 17:2-7 notes the importance of witnesses) and ultimately to God. Such decentralized leadership, in Yoder's estimation, served as a foil to human kingship and as a pointer to YHWH's reign.[23]

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[21] Esp. Deut 16:18-18:22.

[22] Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002), 242-43; and "Why Ecclesiology Is Social Ethics," in *Royal Priesthood*, 117. Yoder expresses his conviction that this pattern is the normative biblical pattern for God's people throughout all ages with the exception of the monarchy in "Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics," in *Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 138-39.

[23] Given his emphasis on Old Testament backgrounds for Free Church ecclesiology, it is surprising that Yoder makes little more than passing reference to the egalitarian structure of pre-monarchial Israel's tribal federation. By this I mean the relative equality between Israel's tribes prior to the monarchy. This was, however, on Yoder's radar. He cites Old Testament scholar Norman Gottwald's *Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1979) to support his conviction that the decentralized order of Israel's tribal constitution was definitional for Israel's identity. Cf. "'To Your Tents, O Israel': The Legacy of Israel's Experience with Holy War," *Studies in Religion* 18, no. 3 (Sum 1989): 354.

Yoder's preferred way to identify this time period is "the time when YHWH was king." In two unpublished skeletal outlines, Yoder spells out his understanding of YHWH's kingship beyond what he says in published writings.[24] In "The Kingship of Jehovah," Yoder makes a six-fold comparison between (a) the kingship of the nations, (b) the falsely assumed alternative to national kingship, and (c) the kingship of YHWH. The first three comparisons that Yoder makes between these options pertain to the organizational structure of Israel's life prior to the monarchy.[25] These are the most relevant to our current purposes and may be summarized as follows:

1. Whereas national kingship defines community along geographic and ethnic lines and assumes the alternative to be lack of community, YHWH's kingship creates a new community by way of covenant.
2. Whereas national kingship uses fixed power structures and assumes the alternative to be a lack of leadership, YHWH's kingship presumes that leadership will be given to the community and that such leadership will be "charismatic," though not in a disorderly sense.
3. Whereas national kingship uses power coercively and assumes the alternative to be non-structured ineffectual anarchy, YHWH's kingship accepts the covenant as voluntary and brings forth appropriate structures for maintaining continuity among the covenant people.

It is interesting to note that, in Yoder's mini-typology, YHWH's kingship appears to be dynamically flexible and respectful of human freedom whereas national kingship is rigid and controlling. There is thus a genuine likeness between the flexible dynamic of Free Church ecclesiology and what Yoder deems the earliest and perhaps most ideal configuration of God's people.

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[24] These unpublished writings, "The Kingship of Jehovah" and "The Kingship of Yahweh," are available in the John Howard Yoder Archival Collection, box 117, which contains many of Yoder's notes and files related to Old Testament studies. This collection is part of the Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee Archives in Goshen, IN. The following link provides an electronic inventory of over 200 boxes from the Yoder Collection: http://www.mcusa-archives.org/personal_collections/YoderJohnHoward.html [Accessed on Feb. 18, 2009].

[25] The three remaining comparisons have to do with Israel's YHWH war posture and add nothing to what has been discussed about this subject above.

According to Yoder, Israel was well aware of the choice between these two rival forms of kingship long before the Israelites demanded their own king like the nations. In "The Kingship of Yahweh," Yoder claims that the Mosaic covenant represented a deliberate choice against national kingship:

> The fundamental structure underlying Yahweh's kingship was the Mosaic covenant which rejected the institution of ancient NE kingship as essentially alien to the Israelite faith, and which brought under its authority all institutions of Israel, including the institution of holy war. This rejection of human kingship and subjection of warfare to the authority of the covenant God were both of one piece, i.e., both acts reserved to Yahweh the monopoly of political power. This rejection of kingship was a deliberate, dogmatic principle in Israel as seen against the background of the Amarna revolution. Its radical nature is suggested by the tradition that at Israel's beginnings there was no human mediation between Yahweh and his people [when God spoke to the people directly on Mt. Sinai], a situation which was unworkable because of the humanness of the people and which was replaced by the charismatic leader. Yahweh's unmediated leadership was projected into the future in the eschatological oracle.[26]

Yoder sees here a sort of progression with regard to kingship. Israel began under unmediated divine kingship at Mount Sinai (Exod 20:18-22). Israel almost immediately transitioned into a form of divine kingship mediated by a charismatic leader, beginning with Moses (Exod 24:1-3). Israel eventually resorted to human kingship like the nations (1 Sam 8). And Israel ultimately longed for a day when unmediated divine kingship would be restored (Ezek 43:7).

According to Yoder's narration, God was rearing Israel during these formative years into a form of existence in which his reign was most definitive and human leadership was necessarily spread out in such a way that Israel would be forced to rely upon God alone. The Israelites were called to be an exemplary culture over against the cultures of the earth, which were built upon the Babel model of humanly engineered unity, stability, and civilization. The greatest obstacle to becoming an exemplary nation

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[26] Yoder, "The Kingship of Yahweh," 1.

that trusts God alone and orders its life according to his intentions is the self-preserving

societal reflex of ordering life around hierarchical, sword-driven governmental structures

like we first saw in Cain's day and subsequently encountered in the city of Babel, the

Babylonian kingdom out of which God called Abraham, and the Egyptian empire out of

which God called nascent Israel. For Yoder, then, the time of the judges should not be

narrated as a time of violent chaos that stemmed from a flawed vision of egalitarian order

and thankfully convinced Israel of every nation's inherent need for a king. Rather, it was

a time when the Israelites' unfaithfulness to Torah and lack of trust in YHWH so

compromised and corrupted their social structures that they illegitimately came to believe

that the only thing that could save them was kingship like the nations.

*Wars of YHWH*

Yoder's narration of Joshua's day is heavily dependent upon the work of Old

Testament scholars Gerhard von Rad and Millard Lind, both of whom have done much to

identify the unique "YHWH war" or "holy war" phenomenon within ancient Israel.[27] For

Yoder, this phenomenon serves not only to explain the unique battles YHWH won for the

Israelites in their formative years, but it also furnishes a key component of Israel's

identity as a people. Yoder summarizes six marks of the YHWH war gestalt as follows:[28]

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[27] Gerhard von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel*, ed. and trans. Marva J. Dawn (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1991); and Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980). Ben Ollenburger's introductory essay to von Rad's *Holy War in Ancient Israel* summarizes von Rad's contributions to the YHWH war discussion and notes how Millard Lind and others corrected and extended his pioneering work in important ways. Cf. "Introduction to Gerhard von Rad's Theory of Holy War," 1-33. In order to emphasize the uniqueness of these wars, over against other wars throughout history that have gone under the label "holy war," Yoder prefers to call them "JHWH wars" or "YHWH wars." Cf. "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," in *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* [hereafter *JCSR*], eds. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 88, n. 10.

[28] Yoder, "Texts That Serve or Texts That Summon: A Response to Michael Walzer," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 20, no. 2 (Fall 1992), 232-233, quoted verbatim. Yoder discusses YHWH war in several additional essays, including "Bible and Civil Turmoil," in *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical*

1. The people were mustered by the sound of the trumpet. There was no standing army, no professional military class. There were in Israel no soldiering skills; only a volunteer militia. In some cases (for example, Gideon) the combatants might be a few.
2. The city and all that is in it shall be devoted to JHWH for destruction (Josh. 6:17). To "devote for destruction" (the root use of *herem*) is first a cultic event, invoking or ascribing the status of tabu, whereby the lives and goods in question become the property of the deity. It is this ceremonial consecration, occurring before the battle, which we cannot understand if we modernize the cultic dimension out of the story.
3. The assembled warriors are called on to trust JHWH as the real actor in the event, who will only act on their behalf if they trust him. Then they go into battle in the confidence that God will "give the enemy into your hand."
4. Then God gives the victory. The enemy panics and usually flees. Sometimes the Israelites participate in the bloodshed of mopping up, sometimes not.
5. Then the sacrifice, which had been promised before the battle, is consummated by the destruction of (some or all of) the lives and goods of the enemy. Obviously what was there to be destroyed would vary enormously, as "the enemy" was sometimes a fortified city, sometimes an armed camp, sometimes a Bedouin village.
6. Then the event ended with a divine demobilization: "To thy tents, O Israel."

From this six-fold description we can identify four aspects of the YHWH war tradition that are central to Yoder's narration of Israel's maturation as a particular kind of people: (1) Yoder underscores the military incompetence of God's people. They are untrained for warfare (there is no warrior class), they lack normal military technology (they depend on farming equipment), and God makes no efforts to ameliorate this deficiency on their part (military preparation is conspicuously absent from Torah). Israel's military incompetence is reinforced by the post-conflict demobilization imperative. The Israelites were not encouraged to stay together in their military formations to mull over what they did right, improve their techniques for next time, or otherwise prolong the military unity they just experienced. Instead, lest they grow

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(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 85-86; "If Abraham Is Our Father," in *Original Revolution*; "God Will Fight for Us," in *Politics of Jesus*; "To Your Tents"; and "Introduction," in Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior*.

accustomed to the military life and make peace with the machinations of war, the ad hoc federation of warriors is quickly dismissed back into ordinary civilian life.

(2) Yoder underscores that God brings victory in these battles. The only preparation the Israelites require is a shared commitment to meticulously obey whatever God commands and to trust that God will hand the enemy into their hands on his terms. Such obedience is not a matter of divine control but of human confession—confession that life is sacred and that only God reserves the right to give it and take it away. To improvise at all in the area of bloodshed is to become guilty of it.

(3) Yoder stresses the connection between the sacrificial nature of bloodshed as described in Genesis 9 and the sacrificial nature of Israel's wars. God did not command Israel to entirely wipe out a city's inhabitants—including children, livestock, and material possessions—because he is vindictive and cruel (Deut 7:24-26). God devoted entire cities to destruction as whole burnt offerings at least partly to reinforce the fact that Israel's battles were not a matter of ordinary imperial expansion.[29] God's people were authorized to take the lives of the Canaanites only because God required them to. This sacrificial emphasis is not restricted to the Canaanites, as if God singled them out for ethnic cleansing. Should Israelite families or clans succumb to idolatry, the same standards of

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[29] It is worth noting that Yoder is somewhat sympathetic to Gerhard von Rad's thesis that the "conquest" of Canaan was not as militarily aggressive as a superficial reading of Joshua leads one to believe ("If Abraham is Our Father," in *Original Revolution*, 107). Von Rad draws upon archaeology to argue for a gradual and more peaceful infiltration of the land and suggests that the battles recorded in Joshua would have been defensive in nature. As residents in the land felt threatened by growing Israelite power, they launched preemptive strikes that necessitated an Israelites response. Yoder's biblical realism thus appears to take a backseat to historical criticism, apparently because Yoder found the conclusions of historical criticism to be helpful for his own position. In a footnote, however, Yoder critically engages von Rad's thesis and appears to draw the more modest conclusion that the texts of Joshua and Judges themselves give evidence that the Canaanites were never completely swept from the land and that the aggressive component of the "conquest" was more limited than is commonly assumed (111, n. 7).

sacrifice must be applied to them (Deut 13:12-18). This happens to Achan and his family in Joshua 7.

(4) Yoder underscores the pervasive presence of the YHWH war posture in Israel's history. YHWH war furnishes the means by which God (a) delivers the Israelites from Egypt, (b) defeats the Amalekites during the wilderness wanderings, (c) delegates control of the Promised Land to Israel, (d) defends Israel's territory against invasions during the time of the Judges, (e) demands that Israel wage war against internal idolatry, and (f) directs Israel's kings (like Jehoshaphat) who submitted to him for their national security.

We thus see that, for Yoder, YHWH war is about more than battles. It is a deliberate posture toward enmity that respects God's exclusive sovereignty over life and trusts God alone to protect and provide for his people. It is a holistic political orientation that stands as an alternative to humanly devised strategies for security and well-being that depend on numerical, technological, and martial supremacy. From the beginning, Yoder narrates the Old Testament story as the divine project of creating an exemplary people whose life together is uniquely structured for genuine peace, not sword-backed pseudo-security. Yet Israel can only be that kind of witness if Israel truly trusts God alone with an Abraham-like faith. The Israelites had to believe that God not only could but would win any battle that needed to be waged on their behalf.

## Deformation of a People: from Monarchy to Its Collapse

Israel's decision to crown a king is one of the most decisive turning points in Yoder's narration of the Old Testament story. In asking for a king, Israel was rejecting God's way of ordering its life. This was a rejection of God's status as king, God's

decision to protect his people through YHWH war, and God's prior rejection of sword-

backed (as opposed to YHWH-backed) governing structures for Israel. Yoder explains

why God opposed this seemingly natural evolution into statehood as follows:

> The [YHWH wars] were totally different than state measures; they were divine miracles. They were proof that God was to be King over God's people. This does not merely mean that there were no generals; it means there was not even a state. When an emergency situation threatened Israel, somebody "blew the trumpet" and immediately the country people flooded together, without proper weapons, in no reasonable power relation to the enemy power, and God gave them victory. It happened without the help of the state. The trumpet parade around Jericho and Gideon's three hundred men armed with clay pots cannot be viewed as powers of the state. These wars were not military battles; in the deepest sense of the word they were experiences of divine worship…. In the early days when Israel still had no king, it was God's will that they live without a governing system even in the extreme situation of a war, in order that Israel would be directly dependent on God's powerful grace.
>
> As soon as Israel got a king "like the other nations" the situation changed. Saul began to abandon the odd and unreliable customs of earlier times; he aimed to build up a nation state with a standing army and a reasoned military policy. For example, he retained the booty instead of destroying it as a great offering. And from that point on, God called forth prophets, starting with Samuel in Saul's time, who saw in these political transactions by Israel's kings the embodiment of disobedience.[30]

According to Yoder, even before the monarchy collapsed under the weight of its

inadequacies, Scripture conveys a negative assessment of Israel's kingship in two ways:

by narrating the monarchy's origin and legacy in ambivalent terms and by showcasing

how various biblical voices pushed beyond it. These ways capture the essence of this

pivotal stage in Yoder's Old Testament narration and will now be discussed.

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[30] Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, trans. Timothy J. Geddert (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 27-28.

Israelite Experience of Monarchy

*Origin of Israel's Monarchy*

Yoder routinely drew upon three passages that informed his understanding of the

origins of Israel's monarchy.[31] The first passage is Deuteronomy 17:14-20:

> When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and
> have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, "I will set a king over
> me, like all the nations that are around me," you may indeed set over you a king
> whom the LORD your God will choose. One of your own community you may
> set as king over you; you are not permitted to put a foreigner over you, who is not
> of your own community. Even so, he must not acquire many horses for himself, or
> return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since the LORD has
> said to you, "You must never return that way again." And he must not acquire
> many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he
> must not acquire in great quantity for himself. When he has taken the throne of his
> kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the
> levitical priests. It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his
> life, so that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, diligently observing all the
> words of this law and these statutes, neither exalting himself above other
> members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to
> the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his
> kingdom in Israel.

At first blush, this passage appears to undermine Yoder's pejorative reading of the

monarchy. It anticipates that the Israelites will request a king like the nations around

them and it grants permission for them to do so, though only under certain conditions: the

king must not accumulate wives, cavalry, or money; the king must diligently study and

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[31] Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, 27-29; "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," in *JCSR*, 70-71; *Preface to Theology*, 242-244; "See How They Go," in *JCSR* 187-188; and "To Serve Our God and to Rule the World," in *Royal Priesthood*, 133. Though Yoder begins with Deuteronomy 17, it is not the first passage in Scripture to discuss the rule of kings among God's people. As far as I can tell, Yoder never addresses God's promise to Abraham and Jacob (Gen 17:6, 17; 35:11) that "nations and kings" will come from them or Jacob's extension of that promise to Judah (Gen 49:10). It is not clear, however, that these passages were intended to narrate Israel's monarchy positively. If they were, then we must also deduce that the divided monarchy was God's good pleasure since God promises in this passage that a plurality of nations would come from them. The point of God's promise in these passages is not to furnish advance endorsement of the monarchy over against later passages concerning the rejection of YHWH's reign that brought about the monarchy (1 Sam 8:7) and the idolatry that brought about the plurality of nations (1 Kgs 11:11-13). It is more likely that God's promise to the patriarchs was intended to instill hope, in terms they could understand, that God would multiply and bless their progeny far beyond what their experiences indicated would be possible. A similar argument can be made of Balaam's oracles about Israelite kingship (Num 24:7, 17-19).

rule according to his own priest-certified copy of Torah; and the king must never elevate

himself above fellow Israelites or Torah. In placing restrictions like these upon the king,

God effectively denies Israel's request to have a king "like the nations" and, instead, sets

forth conditions for a unique, Torah-advocating ruler. This kind of "king" would not use

royal authority to form marital alliances with other nations, replace YHWH war with the

latest military technology (horses and chariots), or advance his own material prosperity.

God would only approve of a king who would use royal authority to uphold God's

kingship by submitting to and promoting his instructions as set forth in Torah. Israel

never had this kind of king.[32] That this account was written after the kingship had fallen

irretrievably into disrepair leads Yoder to interpret it as an advance divine warning

against kingship.[33] Far from legitimizing the monarchy, Deuteronomy 17 sets forth a

hypothetical vision of kingship that, having never materialized in Israel's experience,

only served as a canon by which God's people could measure their experience of

kingship and find it lacking.

The second passage Yoder cites to support his negative narration of the monarchy

is Judges 8-9.[34] In this passage, Gideon wins a decisive battle over two Midianite kings

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[32] One could argue that the description of Solomon's "glorious" reign in 1 Kings 10 is a deliberate condemnation of Solomon since it depicts how he violated nearly every standard set forth in Deuteronomy 17, including the accumulation of numerous wives, amassment of unprecedented wealth, and acquisition of horses and chariots from Egypt. Torah is conspicuously absent from this account, like that of the overwhelming majority of Israel's kings. Yoder highlights Josiah as a notable exception ("To Serve Our God," in *Royal Priesthood*, 133). Josiah is hailed by the biblical author as Israel's finest king (2 Kgs 23:25) though he, too, forsook YHWH war by entering into a strategic military alliance and died an early death as a result (2 Kgs 23:29).

[33] Though Deuteronomy was likely composed of much older sources, most scholars agree that the final canonical form took shape after monarchy's collapse as part of a broader Deuteronomistic history. This broader history is discussed toward the end of chapter 4. For a recent scholarly treatment, cf. Thomas Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007).

[34] See esp. Yoder, *Preface to Theology*, 242.

and avenges himself against those who refused to support him. In response, the Israelites attempt to confer dynastic rule over his household, saying, "Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also; for you have delivered us out of the hand of Midian" (Judg 8:22). As flattering as their suggestion may have been, Gideon rejects it soundly: "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you" (Judg 8:23).

After Gideon's death, his son Abimelech decides to crown himself king by recruiting supporters and killing off all of his brothers. One of his sixty-nine brothers, Jotham, manages to escape and gains an audience with Abimelech's supporters. His harsh words focus not on the wickedness of his brother but the foolishness of those who would support him:

> Listen to me, you lords of Shechem, so that God may listen to you. The trees once went out to anoint a king over themselves. So they said to the olive tree, "Reign over us." The olive tree answered them, "Shall I stop producing my rich oil by which gods and mortals are honored, and go to sway over the trees?" Then the trees said to the fig tree, "You come and reign over us." But the fig tree answered them, "Shall I stop producing my sweetness and my delicious fruit, and go to sway over the trees?" Then the trees said to the vine, "You come and reign over us." But the vine said to them, "Shall I stop producing my wine that cheers gods and mortals, and go to sway over the trees?" So all the trees said to the bramble, "You come and reign over us." And the bramble said to the trees, "If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon" (Judg 9:7-15).

The trees in this fable show how senseless and desperate they are, and thus the lords of Shechem whom they represent. After being rejected by three worthy prospects on grounds that what they are already doing is more worthwhile than serving as king, they resort to selecting a typically useless prickly shrub. This was a scathing indictment on Israel's first monarch and any who would request a king. Abimelech's short-lived reign

ends with divine judgment upon him and his supporters (Judg 9:53-58). Though Yoder

never says so, it may be more than irony that Abimelech's name means "father of the

king(ship)."[35]

Yoder at no point deals with the meaning of the ambiguous refrain that echoes

repeatedly throughout the closing chapters of Judges: "In those days there was no king in

Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes."[36] Does this indicate—over

and against Yoder's reading of Judges 8-9—that kingship was God's preferred solution to

the chaos that prevailed toward the end of the period of the judges?

The third passage to which Yoder appeals, 1 Samuel 8, helps to answer this

question. In this passage, which continues the Deuteronomistic history from where it left

off at the end of Judges, the founding of the Israelite monarchy is spelled out and

evaluated in unambiguously negative terms.[37] After rejecting Samuel's wicked sons as

his potential successors, the Israelites petition Samuel, echoing Deuteronomy 17:14,

saying, "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a

king to govern us, *like other nations*" (1 Sam 8:5). Samuel is understandably disheartened

by this request and consults God for direction. Echoing Gideon, God interprets their

request as a rejection of his own reign over them: "Listen to the voice of the people in all

that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being

king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of

Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you.

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[35] It could also mean "my father is king."

[36] Judg 17:6; 18:1-2; 19:1; and 21:25.

[37] The close connection between Judges and 1 Samuel is obscured in most English Bibles that follow the Greek canonical order in placing the book of Ruth between them. In the Hebrew Bible the final verse of Judges, which highlights Israel's lack of a king, is immediately followed by the story of Samuel, which culminates in the Israelites' unambiguously problematic request for a king.

Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them" (1 Sam 8:7-9).

God grants the Israelites' request, but only after warning them of the many ways their kings will oppress them, including conscripting their sons and daughters into various forms of public and domestic service; assembling a military machine like the nations; confiscating the best of the people's land, servants, and livestock; taxing the people's produce; and ultimately enslaving the general population. This warning culminates in 1 Samuel 8:18, which reads, "And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day." The kingship was thus not God's will but the people's choice—the culmination of a long history of rebellion against God (1 Sam 8:8).

As a concession, God allowed the Israelites to pursue these masochistic aspirations, but not without warning. Their preference for monarchical security over YHWH war protection meant that the Israelites would be left to fend for themselves against their own kings. They will cry out to God but he will not rescue them; he will allow the kingship to crumble under the weight of its own inadequacies. Far from keeping them safe, monarchical "security" will ultimately render the Israelites vulnerable to the Assyrian and Babylonian attacks that will bring about the monarchy's decisive end.

### Legacy of Israel's Monarchy

Yoder does not go into depth about the various events that transpired during Israel's united and divided monarchies. His overall assessment, however, is that Israel's monarchy lived up to God's negative expectations for it. One after another of Israel's kings failed to embody the Torah-framed kingship of Deuteronomy 17. One by one they

patterned their reigns after those of the nations around them—amassing wealth, confiscating land, taxing the people, building palaces, subjugating commoners, standing above the law, acquiring wives, making alliances, gaining horses, counting soldiers, and building military machines. In choosing the monarchy, Israel rejected both the YHWH war security of God's reign and the God-trusting way of life set forth in Torah. To reject the foundation of trust in God alone is to make Torah superfluous.[38]

Though Yoder occasionally notes that monarchy began with Saul, he routinely identifies David as its symbolic figurehead—referring to Israel's kingship on multiple occasions as the "Davidic project" or "Davidic vision."[39] Though other Israelite kings were less faithful to God (e.g., Manasseh) and more reliant upon foreign alliances (e.g., Solomon), Yoder identifies David negatively as Israel's representative king. This is likely because it was David who succeeded most at militant statecraft and David to whom Yoder's ethical interlocutors most often pointed in order to legitimate a selectively violent ethic over against the nonviolent ethic of Jesus.[40] Whatever the reasons, Yoder specifies that David officially abandoned the YHWH war modality by "building a standing army (composed partly of foreigners) loyal only to himself and by utilizing such tactics as letting Joab kill off the heads of tribal militias…and by using his mercenary

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[38] Yoder underscores his conviction that choosing a human king meant rejecting the phenomenon of YHWH wars as well as the care of YHWH as king in "If Abraham is Our Father," in *Original Revolution*, 105-106. That the choice of a king relegated Torah to the margins is evident when King Josiah later discovered Torah manuscripts in his temple renovation project and the people hardly recognized their content (2 Kgs 22-23).

[39] For a reference to Saul, cf. Yoder, "The Power Equation, Jesus, and the Politics of King," in *For the Nations*, 141. For references to David, cf. "See How They Go," 187-188, and "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," 80, in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* [hereafter *JCSR*], eds. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

[40] Yoder, "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," in *JCSR*, 70.

troops against Absalom."[41] Since David, different kings were more or less faithful in adhering to Torah and trusting God in YHWH war fashion during certain battles, but no Israelite king renounced the fundamental dynamic of the Davidic project. That being the case, Yoder's final assessment of the monarchical project, from Saul to Zedekiah, is that it constituted a "tragic detour."[42]

Yoder recognizes, however, that the canonical records are more complicated than this simple picture. He grants that different strands have come together to form the canonical witness that stands before us. He acknowledges that some sources tend to be more favorable to the kingship than others.[43] In particular he notes that after Israel chose to have a king like the nations at least two different and competing conceptions emerged:

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[41] Yoder, "To Your Tents," 349. In many additional places Yoder draws attention to the presence of foreigners, like Uriah the Hittite, among Israel's military ranks (e.g., Yoder, "Texts that Serve," 233). Yoder suspects that this was necessary because the Israelites who had hitherto experienced and trusted in YHWH war would have lacked the requisite skills. In a two-page letter addressed to Millard Lind (found in the John Howard Yoder Archival Collection, box 117, dated Nov 20, 1969), Yoder sets forth the provocative thesis that it may not have been the Exodus contingent that lured Israel toward the kingship with its militant posture but a foreign contingent that had been incorporated into Israel. After drawing attention to the likely foreign origins of Uriah and Ahitophel (Bathsheba's grandfather), Yoder speculates that "the advocacy of kingship as well as the institution of the standing army would have entered Israelite society borne by a class of persons who had been functioning in the same way before they became Israelites. So Ahitophel and Uriah the Hittite were representatives of a non-Hebrew warrior class who were gradually incorporated into ethnic Israel because the culturally changing Hebrew population had too few people to do that kind of job….So in conclusion, warfare in the age of the Davidic kingdom, like David's kingship itself, was not simply a new and foreign element in terms of theology and ideology but was also a foreign element sociologically, carried within Israelite society by a non-Israelite layer of the population. Not only did they assimilate non-Israelite groups to hew their wood and draw their water; they also adopted non-Israelite leaders to run their wars." Though Yoder suggests in this letter that his speculative hypothesis requires further testing, this did not stop him from routinely drawing attention to the presence of foreigners in Israel's army in published writings as noted above.

[42] Yoder, "The Power Equation, Jesus, and the Politics of King," in *For the Nations*, 141.

[43] Yoder admits this in "To Serve Our God," in *Royal Priesthood*, 133. Yoder should not be understood as ignoring the covenant to David in 2 Samuel 7 but as locating it within the broader canonical trajectory. He would reject readings that treat it as a static promise. Since part of the covenant with David is fulfilled in Solomon, we must consider how Solomon's reign is presented in the wider Deuteronomistic history. To do so entails placing the depiction of the kind of king God would approve alongside its reverse-fulfillment in Solomon in 1 Kings 10. In this chapter, Solomon violates the prohibitions against mixed marriages, accumulates gold and silver, returns to Egypt for horses, and thus exalts himself above the people. These blatant violations, in turn, must be read in light of God's warning in 1 Kings 9 to bring an end to Solomon and his house if Solomon does not keep God's instructions. As the history unfolds, this is

From then on the notion of a kingly line possessing an unconditional covenant forever (2 Samuel 7:13) was perennially at war within Israel with the older tradition of a royal mandate conditional upon keeping the (Mosaic) 'statutes and ordinances' (1 Kings 9:1-9). The announcement made to Solomon (immediately by YHWH with no prophet named) in 1 Kings 11 reconciles the two promises by telling Solomon that by his disobedience he has forfeited the kingship of Israel, but with the proviso that the unconditional covenant will be respected by leaving to Solomon's son a rump realm of one tribe.[44]

This positive, though qualified, account of the kingship's abiding relevance must be reckoned with in any narration of Israel's monarchy. Yoder does not do so, however, by splicing the biblical record into competing pro- and anti-monarchical sources. Rather, he holds that Scripture represents the evolution of Israel's self-understanding and grants that, from the perspective of many Israelites, the kingship held great promise and would be a constitutive part of their future restoration. That these voices are present in the canonical witness is beyond question. Yoder reconciles these more positive assessments with monarchy's dubious origins by continuing to read the story directionally. Readers must not freeze any moment in Israel's history in an effort to decipher ambiguous passages about who or what was right and who or what was wrong. Readers must keep reading the story, with the questions it raises along the way, to see where it leads and to ask whether the text itself later offers answers.

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precisely what happens. Solomon's reign is first torn into two unequal portions (Solomon's heir receiving the smaller) and it is later removed altogether by Babylon. The monarchy, as such, is never restored. Though monarchical hope remains in eschatological form, its fulfillment in Jesus—already anticipated in the servant songs of Isaiah—is radically transformed to look nothing like the nations' kings. It is a form of kingship that is not located in Jerusalem, tied to the temple, secured through marital alliance, or backed by a standing army. In short, all the innovations introduced into Israel's life by David and Solomon's reigns were effectively dismantled. Far from endorsing the monarchical project, God honors his covenant with David by kicking the monarchical crutch out from under the Israelites and reasserting their dependence on him alone.

[44] Yoder, "To Your Tents," 349. Yoder also notes the influence of different strands in "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," in *JCSR*, 71. He emphasizes, however, that these diverse strands exhibit a common trajectory.

Yoder is confident, in the case of monarchy, that later texts offer a clear answer. The divinely engineered collapse of the monarchy is one part of that answer. Jesus' choice not to reestablish an Israelite kingship like the nations constitutes another part. Yet long before these decisive events, historians, prophets, and poets within Israel began challenging the monarchy and shaping Israel's life in anticipation of its future post-monarchical existence.

<div align="center">Israelite Qualification of Monarchy</div>

Once Israel begins heading down the monarchical path and the kingship is imbued with eschatological significance, there is no going back. In allowing the Israelites to head down this path, however, God does not abandon them altogether. He commits himself to moving his purposes for Israel forward from within and alongside the monarchical vantage point with all of its inherent liabilities. According to Yoder, this movement begins immediately with the founding of the kingship (as evident in God's warning through Samuel) and continues throughout its tumultuous existence. Yoder's narration showcases diverse canonical witnesses to a consistent trajectory of resistance to kingship like the nations and insistence upon YHWH's kingship. Foremost among these witnesses are Israel's prophets, historians, and psalmists.[45]

*Reluctant Prophets*

Though Israel's monarchs had structurally rejected the YHWH war posture to which God called Israel, Yoder notes that various prophets, prior to the monarchy's collapse, continued to think in YHWH war terms and to use such terms to evaluate

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[45] Yoder, "To Serve Our God," in *Royal Priesthood*, 133.

Israel's present course of action and future hope.[46] Significantly, however, these prophets

did not call upon the YHWH war tradition to legitimate Israel's dramatic overthrow of

their enemies. Instead, they used it to argue that God's providential protection of Israel in

the past means that Israel should continue to rely upon him alone for their future. The

impact of such proclamation, according to Yoder, "was to work *against* the development

of a military caste, military alliances, and political designs based on the availability of

military power."[47]

Though the prophets accepted the reality and submitted to the authority of the

monarchy, they did not necessarily endorse it. Rather, they sought to make the best of an

ambivalent situation that was beyond their control in ways analogous to how figures like

Joseph, Daniel, and Esther submitted to the authority and sought the good of pagan kings

and their kingdoms.[48] Yet the prophets went one step further than these cosmopolitan

Jews insofar as they directed the Israelite king toward the kind of kingship envisioned in

Deuteronomy. They encouraged Israel's kings to trust God alone, submit to his laws, and

avoid the temptation to emulate the kings who ruled over the nations around Israel. Yoder

upholds Isaiah as a noteworthy prophetic example:

> He hunted out King Ahaz "at the upper pool" (Isa. 7), where he was no doubt
> examining fortifications in light of a war threat. Ahaz was not commanded to
> follow through on defense measures, but rather to trust in God, for God wanted to
> be personally responsible to make sure the calamity would not occur. On another

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[46] Yoder, "To Your Tents," 350.

[47] Yoder, "If Abraham is Our Father," in *Original Revolution*, 106 (original emphasis).

[48] Though Yoder did not make this analogy between the prophets and these Jewish heroes, he repeatedly referred to them as examples of submission to the authority of rulers who did not seek first God's kingdom. They thus become examples of how Christians may seek the peace of the cities where they live without forgetting that their ultimate allegiance and citizenship is not bound to those cities. E.g., "Christian Case for Democracy," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 153-154; "Exodus and Exile," 306-07; "To Serve Our God," in *Royal Priesthood*, 134-35; and "See How They Go," in *JCSR*, 186.

occasion, (Isa. 18, 30, 31) the prophet depicted God as the one who would personally appear to save Israel; God would come in a thunderstorm, would come as a lion, would swoop down as a bird from on high to protect its young. This salvation would be nothing short of miraculous. It would not even be a holy war; it would not require even the trumpets of Joshua or the pitchers of Gideon. But the political officials did not have enough faith to trust God. They had more faith in their alliances with Egypt, and in their horses and chariots. And it proved to be their undoing. Because they despised the "waters of Shiloah that flow gently," the Assyrian flood swept them away (Isa. 8:6-8).[49]

True prophets like Isaiah sought to hold together the flagging monarchy by denouncing cultic and political idolatry and by emphasizing God's ongoing workings with Israel.[50] False prophets, on the other hand, supported the state and all of its projects by rubber-stamping the royal agenda with divine approval, proclaiming peace where there was none, and making God into a handyman rather than a judge. It was the false prophets, according to Yoder, who inaugurated a line of Israelites who sanctified nationalism with the name of God.[51] True prophets were more sober about the kingship's potential. Isaiah's eighth-century contemporary, Hosea, was perhaps most critical when conveying God's estimation of the kingship: "I gave you a king in my anger, and I took him away in my wrath" (Hos 13:11).

The more subtle means by which prophets challenged the monarchy are particularly relevant to Yoder's appropriation of the Old Testament for ecclesiology. They did so by redefining the nature of God's people in two ways that began to make the original purposes of both YHWH wars and monarchy superfluous. They did so by emphasizing a vision of YHWH's concern for all nations and forecasting a day when all

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[49] Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, 28-29.

[50] Yoder, *Christian Witness to the State* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 36.

[51] Yoder, "If Christ Is Truly Lord," in *Original Revolution*, 68.

nations will flock to Jerusalem to learn the law, and they did so by advocating the

concept of a faithful remnant of Israelites who bore the meaning of God's people.[52] This

means that God's people could no longer assume that all of Israel, as a geographical and

ethnic entity, would be usable for YHWH's purposes. Yoder notes that these concepts did

not originate with the prophets. They were already inherent in the promise that

Abraham's descendants would be a blessing to all nations and, although early Israel was

relatively exclusive of Egyptians, Canaanites, and enemies, the Mosaic laws made

generous provisions for assimilating aliens and strangers.[53] Though Israel certainly had

an ethnic base, it maintained something of a permeable unity. Yoder notes the

implications of these developments for God's people:

> Once all men are seen as potential partakers of the covenant, then the outsider can
> no longer be perceived as less than human or as an object for sacrificing. Once
> one's own national existence is no longer seen as a guarantee of Jahweh's favor,
> then to save this national existence by a holy war is no longer a purpose for which
> miracles would be expected. Thus the dismantling of the applicability of the
> concept of the holy war takes place not by the promulgation of a new ethical
> demand but by a restructuring of the Israelite perception of community under
> God.[54]

This subtle redefinition of God's people also has important implications for

Israel's monarchy. If God chose to extend his favor to at least some non-Israelites (those

who stream to Jerusalem to learn Torah) and continued to extend that favor to only some

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[52] Yoder, "If Abraham Is Our Father," in *Original Revolution*, 108.

[53] Yoder discusses the diverse composition of Israel in "Civil Religion in America," 189, and "Introduction," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 10; "If Abraham," in *Original Revolution*, 108, 110; and "Judaism as a Non-non-Christian Religion," in *JCSR*, 155. That Israel was composed partly of Egyptians and native Canaanites is evident in the mixed group that left Egypt with the Israelites (Exod 12:38), the incorporation of Rahab's family into Israel (Josh 6:25), and the treaty with the Gibeonites (Josh 9). The movement toward greater inclusivity gains considerable momentum after the collapse of the state when some diaspora Jews found ways to include Gentiles and others found ways to blend completely into the nations. By the time of John that Baptist, Yoder notes, being born Jewish does not make one a Jew—a faith like Abraham is required. This principle played a critical part in the Apostle Paul's mission to the Gentiles.

[54] Yoder, "If Abraham is Our Father," in *Original Revolution*, 108.

Israelites (the faithful remnant), then how might an Israelite monarch serve God's salvific

purposes when that monarch must protect the interests of all Israelites and maintain a

defensive posture against all non-Israelites? Something must change. During the

monarchical period, Israel's prophets thus served in Yoder's narration both to preserve

some semblance of God's abiding reign over his people and to expand Israel's vision of

peoplehood in anticipation of God's providential reconfiguration of his people upon

monarchy's collapse.

*Nostalgic Historians*

For Yoder, the theologically-oriented historiography of 2 Chronicles corroborates

the prophetic impulse by demonstrating that the YHWH war tradition never fully died out

among Israel, even if the monarchy diluted it considerably.[55] He exegetes five passages

from 2 Chronicles that illustrate this point. They may be summarized as follows:

1. Second Chronicles 14:11 relates Asa's prayer that God would deliver Israel from the four times more powerful Ethiopian army; God grants his request.
2. Second Chronicles 16 records the prophet Hanani's critique of King Asa for allying with Syria against the northern kingdom rather than relying on God alone; God subsequently ensures Asa's defeat and perpetual embroilment in wars.
3. Second Chronicles 20:17 recounts how the prophet Jahaziel assured King Jehoshaphat and the entire assembly, who had called upon God alone to save them against overwhelming military odds, that they would not need to fight the battle because God would do so for them; God did so without Judah's help.
4. Second Chronicles 20:29 remembers the fear that came upon all the kingdoms surrounding Judah because God fought on its behalf.
5. Second Chronicles 32:8 reports God's miraculous deliverance of Hezekiah and all of Jerusalem from the Assyrian army during Sennacherib's invasion; God again wins the battle without his people lifting a finger.

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[55] Yoder undertakes his most in-depth engagement of the YHWH war theme in 2 Chronicles in "God Will Fight for Us," in *Politics of Jesus*, 79-81. See also briefer allusions in "If Abraham Is Our Father," in *Original Revolution*, 106; and "To Your Tents," 252.

The common thread in all of these accounts (and ones like them in 2 Kings 6, 18, and 19) is that God fought and won the Israelites' battles for them—just like he did in Joshua's day—because they relied on him alone for their national security. Such accounts were not the norm because, more often than not, Israel's kings relied on their own military might and strategic political alliances. That these monarchial YHWH war accounts endured in Israel's historical memory supports Yoder's contention that YHWH war, not monarchy, was the abiding norm for God's people throughout the entire Old Testament story—even though, as discussed below, its expression will significantly change after monarchy's collapse.[56]

As noted previously, Yoder also enlists key passages from the deuteronomistic history, including Deuteronomy 17, Judges 9, and 1 Samuel 8, to bolster his narration. Moreover, in several places he acknowledges that this history, which spans Deuteronomy through 2 Kings, likely went through multiple stages of redaction. This process, which involved the weaving together of various historical strands from different time periods, culminated only after the monarchy had fallen and after the Jeremianic turn with its diasporic reconfiguration was accepted by God's people. This means, for Yoder, that the conspicuous placement of anti-monarchical passages like Deuteronomy 17, Judges 9, and 1 Samuel 8 at the front of Israel's history was intentional and reflects the conviction of those Jews who delivered this history to God's people in its final canonical form. Though Yoder acknowledges diverse strands within this tradition, he deems it important to note that the form of this history that was accepted as Scripture by God's people lacks any hint

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[56] Yoder, "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," in *JCSR*, 74.

of irredentism and is framed in such a way as to warn against the monarchical project and thus to endorse the Jeremianic vision that replaced it.[57]

*Subversive Psalmists*

Though Yoder refers to "psalmists" as those who upheld the YHWH war vision, alongside the aforementioned prophets and historians, he does not cite the canonical Psalter to support this claim.[58] Rather, in numerous places he points to the servant songs of Isaiah.[59] The pivotal role these songs play in Yoder's Old Testament narration can hardly be overstated. According to Yoder, the servant of the Lord discussed in these songs is God's ultimate solution to the problem posed by Israel's kingship. Israel could never go back to a strict YHWH war posture; its expectation of an eternal kingship would not allow for that. Israel could only move forward with a radically new understanding of what kingship means. God does not abandon the notion of kingship altogether; he transforms it into something useful both to reaffirm his reign and to reconfigure the shape

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[57] Yoder, "See How They Go," in *JCSR*, 188 and 193-194.

[58] Yoder, "To Serve Our God," in *Royal Priesthood*, 133. This does not mean that the Psalter played no role in Yoder's Old Testament narration. In "See How They Go," in *JCSR*, 186, Yoder cites Psalms 120-34 as evidence of the liturgy of scattered Jewish communities who were adjusting to the Jeremianic turn that is discussed below. No doubt Yoder was aware that some psalms enthusiastically support the monarchy, whereas others celebrate YHWH's kingship. Yoder likely would have found Gerald H. Wilson's canonical approach to the Psalter extremely helpful, since Wilson claims that there is deliberate movement within the canonical arrangement of the Psalter away from human kingship and toward the kingship of YHWH. Cf. "The Shape of the Book of Psalms," *Interpretation 46* (1992): 129-142. Yoder also points out, citing Psalms 15 and 24, that ancient Israel recognized that not just anyone was fit to bring the ark of YHWH to the temple. Rather, a certain moral quality was required. He combines this with other Old Testament evidence to suggest that a certain kind of Free Church mindset was operative within ancient Israel. Cf. Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 10.

[59] E.g., Yoder, "Behold My Servant Shall Prosper," in *Karl Barth and the Problem of War and Other Essays on Barth*, ed. Mark T. Nation (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2003), 149-167; "Bible and Civil Turmoil," 86, and "Spirit of God and Politics of Men," 223-226, in *For the Nations*; "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," in *JCSR*, 71; *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, 29; *Preface to Theology*, 243-44; and "Voice of Your Brother's Blood," 67, and "Your Hope is Too Small," 123-130, in *He Came Preaching Peace* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985).

of his people.[60] He does this through the image of the suffering servant. Yoder swiftly

cuts through the complications of this mysterious section of Isaiah and gets to the heart of

its meaning for his Old Testament narration as follows:

> What it means for God to want a person to be God's prince and servant is defined, by the time we get into the prophetic period, by the figure of the servant of the Lord in the latter part of the book of Isaiah. Here the "servant of the Lord" is a technical term; it clearly means a kingly figure. Scholars differ as to whether it means one person or a type, whether it is strictly future, or whether there was a prince in exile in Babylon to whom it was spoken. They differ in the extent to which they think this man englobes the fate of all Israel in his peculiar redefinition of what it means to be God's servant. But in any case, the kind of king God wants is a servant. Isaiah 42, 49, 52, and 53, say that the kind of king in whom God is pleased will bring God's righteousness to the ends of the earth.[61]

Isaiah 42 assigns this servant the important task of establishing God's liberating

justice on the earth, but not without the qualifier that he is to do this, as Yoder

summarizes it, "in quietness and weakness without raising his voice to make it heard in

the street, without breaking a bruised reed or quenching a smoldering wick."[62] In chapter

49, this servant's dependence upon God alone is accentuated in verses 4-5 as well as his

failure to accomplish his appointed mission to restore Israel. God does not despair of this

shortcoming; instead, he notes that it is too little an accomplishment that his supposed

underachiever would restore Israel. Rather, God will use him as a light to the nations—a

light that will reach the ends of the earth (Isa 49:6).[63] Chapters 52-53 go on to describe

the unimpressive appearance of this servant as well as his rejection by the people. The

combined portrait of these chapters yields a servant who is least likely to succeed

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[60] Yoder, *Preface to Theology*, 243-44.

[61] Yoder, *Preface to Theology*, 243-44.

[62] Yoder, "Behold My Servant Shall Prosper," in *Karl Barth and the Problem of War*, 151-52.

[63] Yoder, "Your Hope is Too Small," in *He Came Preaching Peace*, 124-25.

according to all commonly accepted standards. Since his only strength is in God, however, he is able to be used by God to carry out his mission on behalf of the entire world.

Yoder does not try to solve the riddle as to whether this servant is a single individual, the people of Israel as a whole, a small group within Israel, or a combination of these options. More important than the precise identity of the servant, for Yoder, is the meaning of the account about him: "It constitutes within real human history a concrete (civil!) alternative to both the world-dominating claims of Cyrus (or Caesar) and to the righteous zeal of the Maccabees. This is not political language being used metaphorically to describe spiritual transcendence or quietism. It is a concretely alternative way to be God's Servant, in both corporate and individual personhood."[64]

In the Davidic project, the fate of the people is tied to the fate of the king. Should the king wage war, the people follow suit. Should the king promote idolatry, the people go astray. So whether this servant represents the king or the people or both, the meaning is the same. The future fate of God's people is now tied to the new way of overcoming opposition and blessing the nations that is exemplified in God's suffering servant. This is how, Yoder argues, the early church interpreted this passage. They saw Jesus as this servant, and they saw this aspect of Jesus' identity as normative for his people.[65]

But how could a suffering servant truly fill the gap left by God's abandonment of YHWH war? YHWH war not only provided a way of leading and shaping Israel's life, it also constituted God's way of fighting off Israel's enemies. Since this servant was not a

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[64] Yoder, "The Bible and Civil Turmoil," in *For the Nations*, 86.

[65] Yoder, "Behold My Servant Shall Prosper," in *Karl Barth and the Problem of War*, 152-53.

warrior, his kind of reign would presumably leave Israel vulnerable to attacks. God's

solution to this dilemma is twofold. First, as will be explored in the next stage, God

transforms his people into a transterritorial nation that is not tied to any plot of land. That

being the case, Israel would have no geographic enemies to ward off. They could find a

way to exist in any territory and, if conditions made living there unbearable, they were

free to relocate.

Second, God had already established in Isaiah 10 that he is willing and able to use

the sword of pagan nations to carry out his wrath upon his own people as well as those

who oppress his people or otherwise warrant divine discipline.[66] God says of Assyria, in

Isaiah 10:5-12,

> Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger—the club in their hands is my fury! Against a
> godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to
> take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.
> But this is not what he intends, nor does he have this in mind; but it is in his heart
> to destroy, and to cut off nations not a few. For he says: "Are not my commanders
> all kings? Is not Calno like Carchemish? Is not Hamath like Arpad? Is not
> Samaria like Damascus? As my hand has reached to the kingdoms of the idols
> whose images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria, shall I not do to
> Jerusalem and her idols what I have done to Samaria and her images?" When the
> Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish
> the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his haughty pride.

God's use of nations, like Assyria, does not mean that they are justified in their war-

mongering ways. Rather, Yoder notes that "Isaiah 10 exemplifies God's use of the state's

vengeance to administer His judgment, but without approving of the vengefulness, and

without exempting the 'scourge of His wrath' from judgment in its turn."[67] It is clear in

Isaiah 10 that God's special use of Assyria gives Assyria no reason to boast. Assyria

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[66] Yoder, *Christian Witness to the State*, 10, 11, 16, and 47; and "If Christ is Truly Lord," in *Original Revolution*, 62 and 84.

[67] Yoder, "If Christ Is Truly Lord," in *Original Revolution*, 62.

believes its victories are a sign of its own greatness and has no clue that, after God is done using the Assyrians for his purposes, God will subsequently use a different self-absorbed nation to punish them. This strategy is equally present in the context of the servant songs. Isaiah 45:1 states that the pagan ruler Cyrus will be God's instrument to subdue the nations so that God's servant Israel may be free to carry out its responsibility of being God's light to the nations.

This pattern continues throughout the rest of the biblical narrative. God uses Babylon to punish Assyria, Persia to punish Babylon, Greece to punish Persia and, eventually, Rome to punish Greece. Yoder sees this as an essential background for Paul's teaching in Romans 12-13. Christians can love their enemies without retaliating against offenses incurred because God will avenge their enemies of wrongdoing using the sword of pagan rulers. The world will not fall apart if God does not use his people to wage YHWH war against all evil. God can position his people throughout the world as a peaceful blessing to all nations precisely because God has control over all nations and elects to use the nations' self-interest to keep in check the self-interest of other nations.[68]

## Re-Formation of a People: from Jeremiah to the Early Church

### Monarchical Collapse

Israel's decision to pursue kingship like the nations produced a variety of responses, both positive and negative, within Israel. Indeed, as Yoder notes, "As long as the royal house of Judah stood, the royal ideology could claim equal status in the same

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[68] Yoder, "Behold My Servant Shall Prosper," in *Karl Barth and the Problem of War*, 160-67; and "Let Every Soul Be Subject," in *Politics of Jesus*, 193-210.

histories and in the psalms beside the prophetic one."[69] That all changed, however, after

the monarchy finally collapsed after its volatile 500-year stint. Yoder goes on to say,

> In the early sixth century, however, things began to be sorted out. The age of Jeremiah, and his message, precipitated the definition of diaspora as not merely a chastisement but also a calling. To "seek the peace of that city where JHWH has sent you" meant for Jewry all the way from Jeremiah to Rosenzweig and Bucer the acceptance of a nonsovereign, non-territorial self definition. Efforts to restore the royal ideology, from the Maccabees to Bar Kochba, all failed….The rabbis, some as early as Johanan ben Zakkai and all of them after 135, read that history as God's having ratified his word to Jeremiah.[70]

The diasporic reconfiguration represented by Jeremiah constituted a monumental

shift away from both monarchical rule and palestinocentric existence—a shift that

provided the context for Jesus' ministry and the early Church's missionary posture.

According to Yoder's canonical-directional reading, this reconfiguration served to

definitively confirm the anti-monarchical voices that sounded throughout Israel's history

and to qualify those that advocated kingship like the nations. This confirmation and

qualification is important for our purposes because, just as the rise of monarchy called

forth a fundamental change in the social shape of God's people, so did its demise. We

thus conclude Yoder's Old Testament narration by stepping back and tracing the

development of the critically-important (from an ecclesiological perspective) Jeremianic

turn in Yoder's thought and by noting his interpretation of the post-exilic restoration

projects of Ezra and Nehemiah that appear to stand in tension with it.

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[69] Yoder, "To Serve Our God," in *Royal Priesthood*, 133.

[70] Yoder, "To Serve Our God," in *Royal Priesthood*, 133-134.

Diasporic Commission

In the last two decades of his life, Yoder began focusing on the significance of

Jewish history for understanding the nature and origin of Christian nonviolence.[71] This

work yielded a revised understanding of both the collapse of the monarchy and the exile

to Babylon that produced ripple effects in multiple directions. Yoder's clarion call for this

revision is first sounded (in print) in Yoder's introduction to Lind's *Yahweh Is a*

*Warrior*.[72] In this brief piece, Yoder sketches the "near-Marcionite" manner by which

some scholars discuss biblical warfare and then remarks, "The total interpretive *Gestalt*

just sketched needs revision from every angle: the underlying anti-Judaism, the imperial

establishment mood, the failure to perceive in the Hebrew scriptures the evolution from

Joshua to Jeremiah, and in postcolonial Judaism the further evolution through Jochanan

ben Zakkai to Judah 'the Prince.'"[73] From this point forward, this evolution from Joshua

to Judah, which pivots around Jeremiah, becomes central to Yoder's project.

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[71] Much of this work has been gathered and published after Yoder's untimely death (in 1997) as *JCSR*. For concise summaries of Yoder's account of diaspora in this work, cf. Duane K. Friesen, "Yoder and the Jews: Cosmopolitan Homelessness as Ecclesial Model," in *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder's Contributions to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking*, eds. Ben C. Ollenburger and Gayle Gerber Koontz (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2004),145-160; and Alain Epp Weaver, *States of Exile: Visions of Diaspora, Witness, and Return* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2008), chs 1-4. In *Practicing the Politics of Jesus: The Origin and Significance of John Howard Yoder's Social Ethics* (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2007), 111, Earl Zimmerman roots Yoder's diasporic model for Christian presence in the world in Barth's "Letter to a Pastor in the German Democratic Republic," in Karl Barth and Johannes Hamel, *How to Serve God in a Marxist Land* (New York: Association Press, 1959), 55-56. In this letter Barth encourages an unnamed pastor under an oppressive regime to read Jeremiah 29 carefully in order to discern what light it might shed on his situation. Yet this thought is not further developed and Yoder never cites it, so it is not clear to what extent Yoder drew inspiration from Barth's brief comments in this letter.

[72] Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior*, 1980. Yoder makes a passing reference to this revision in a lecture delivered the year before but not published until much later: "The Bible and Civil Turmoil," in *For the Nations*, 86; and in "Exodus 20:13 – 'Thou Shalt Not Kill," *Interpretation* 34, no. 4 (Oct 1980): 398 [this was later reprinted in *To Hear the Word*]. Yoder's revision is also somewhat anticipated, but not developed, in his earlier engagements with liberation theology. In "Exodus and Exile," 306 (1973), Yoder notes that God abandoned nationhood as a model of peoplehood for Israel and that Jeremiah advocated a model for living under pagan oppression that was taken over by Christians and has more widespread biblical support (e.g., Joseph, Daniel, and Esther) than Exodus, which was a one-time unique event.

In "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," a lecture delivered two years later, Yoder further unpacks his conviction that after Jeremiah the Israelites took on a form of existence that lent itself to pacifism and was consistent with Israel's prior YHWH war posture—consistent because it continued shaping God's people into a people that trusts God alone for its sustenance and survival. Yoder's platform passage for this transition is Jeremiah 29:4-7: "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

In advising the Israelites to accept the yoke of Babylon and make themselves at home in exile, Yoder argues, Jeremiah was not simply sharing practical skills for surviving a temporary whirlwind of divine judgment; he was permanently reconfiguring and repositioning Israel for transterritorial existence and global mission.[74] That the three elements of Jeremiah's commission—building, planting, marrying—correspond to the three exemptions from warfare in Deuteronomy 20 may suggest that these instructions are about more than home building.[75] Regardless, the exiled Jews ceased to be a people

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[73] Yoder, "Introduction," in Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior*, 18.

[74] In "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," in *JCSR*, 79, Yoder emphasizes that the diaspora was not simply a last resort but was firmly rooted in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

[75] Cf. Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile* (Bloomington, IN: Meyer-Stone Books, 1989), 132-137. This peaceful way of relating to Israel's pagan neighbors may not simply be a matter of keeping a low profile on hostile turf. Isaiah groups them together in his vision of Israel's glorious future (Isa 65:21-23). The exiles would certainly not have

of the city (Jerusalem) and of the soil (Palestine) and became a people of the book

(Torah). They needed neither a centralized cult with its sacrificial system and priestly

supports nor a centralized government with its royal court and military backing. They

found creative ways to maintain their identity as God's people on foreign soil.

This Jeremianic commission not only laid the groundwork for Israel's new social

shape but it clinched Yoder's case for a negative estimation of Israel's monarchy.

Moreover, it was subsequently reinforced by the failure of later Jewish attempts to

reverse it. Yoder explains:

> Already in the histories of the age of Gideon and Jotham, Samuel and Saul, the
> recognition of JHWH as a warrior and king had led to rejecting not accepting the
> notion that Israel should adopt the institution of kingship "like the other nations."
> The later review of that national story by the prophets became still more critical of
> kingship. National independence was forfeited, first in the North and then in
> Judaea as well, because of the unwillingness of the kings and the people to trust
> God for their national survival. With Jeremiah God abandoned kingship as a
> vehicle of his people's identity. With Ezra and Nehemiah the return to live and
> worship in Judaea was brought about without political independence or a king.
> The Maccabean adventure, although militarily successful for a time, ultimately
> further discredited the holy war vision. The texts of Esther and Daniel…fill out
> the picture of the faithful life that can be lived under pagan kings.[76]

This basic schema is either presumed or further spelled out in all of Yoder's

subsequent works on this subject. In 1989 he published his last full-length article on

YHWH war in which, after restating his conviction that God does the fighting in such

wars, Yoder goes on to say that the people's responsibility to trust in YHWH alone

eventually took on a sociological form in which David—not diaspora—was the detour.[77]

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confused their time in exile with the eschaton, but they may have embraced the opportunity to drop their
swords and get along with the Babylonians without constant friction.

[76] Yoder, "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," in *JCSR*, 70-71. This essay was delivered as a Bethel
College lecture, in 1982, before being published in *JCSR* in 2003.

[77] Yoder, "To Your Tents, O Israel," 35.

In 1992 Yoder wrote a brief response to Michael Walzer's de-historicizing approach, which reduces the YHWH wars of Israel to a later Deuteronomistic re-write.[78] Yoder faults Walzer for ignoring the cultic dimensions of YHWH war and for positing a revision of history that is unconvincing and raises more problems than it solves. His most relevant objection to Walzer's approach, however, is that it fails to account for the fact that the Jeremianic vision, which spans the exile and continues well beyond it, has more in common with the earlier YHWH war tradition than it does the monarchical project that de-historicists make central. Having missed the underlying significance of YHWH war and having ignored its development in Jeremiah, de-historicists embrace the exception—monarchy with its standing army—and make it the rule.

Yoder's earliest engagements with the Jeremianic turn focus most on issues of YHWH war, nonviolence, and God's judgment upon the monarchy. His last and most robust treatment of this topic focuses on its implications for ecclesiology which, for Yoder, cannot be separated from these earlier topics. This treatment, originally a lecture delivered in 1995, was later published under the title "See How They Go with Their Face to the Sun."[79] In this essay, Yoder makes explicit that Jeremiah is the turning point of Jewish history, not only in the biblical narrative but beyond:

> More than Christians are aware, Babylon itself very soon became the cultural centre of world Jewry, from the age of Jeremiah until the time we in the West call the Middle Ages. The people who re-colonized the "Land of Israel," repeatedly, from the age of Jeremiah to that of Jochanan ben Zakkai, and again still later, were supported financially and educationally from Babylon, and in lesser ways from the rest of the diaspora. Our palestinocentric reading of the story is a mistake, though a very understandable one…. In all the different ways

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[78] Yoder, "Texts That Serve"; Michael Walzer, "The Idea of Holy War in Ancient Israel," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 20, vol. 2 (Fall 1992): 215-228.

[79] Yoder, "See How They Go," in *JCSR*, 183-202.

represented by Sadducees, Pharisees, Maccabeans and Essenes, Jews in Palestine had no choice but to define their identity over against the dominant Gentiles and to be divided from one another by their conflicting responses to that challenge. On the other hand, the synagogues and rabbis in Babylon, and in the rest of the world where the Babylonian model was followed and the Babylonian teachers were consulted, were spared that self-defeating distraction, so as to enter into creatively that Jeremianic phase of creating something qualitatively new in the history of religions.[80]

That "something qualitatively new" was a faith community with at least four defining attributes. (1) They took directives not from centralized headquarters but from a copyable text that could be read anywhere. (2) A local cell need comprise only ten households without priesthood and hierarchy. (3) They sustained international unity through intervisitation, intermarriage, commerce, and rabbinic consultation. (4) Their common life or walk as shaped by their story served as the ground floor of their identity.[81] Here we see that temple, court, and king were eventually replaced by synagogue, Torah, and the rabbinate.[82] Since faithfulness was no longer tied to national well-being, the stories of Joseph, Daniel, and Esther served as important models for creative adaptation to life under a pagan imperial system.[83]

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[80] Yoder, "See How They Go," in *JCSR*, 186.

[81] Yoder, "See How They Go," in *JCSR*, 187.

[82] Yoder discusses these three components in "On Not Being in Charge," in *JCSR*, 171.

[83] Cf. Yoder, "Christian Case for Democracy," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 153-54; "Exodus and Exile," 306-307; "To Serve Our God," in *Royal Priesthood*, 134-35; and "See How They Go," in *JCSR*, 186. One must take care, however, how one appropriates these examples. Joseph, Daniel, and Esther did not proactively seek high offices in pagan governments. Each was drafted, at least at first, against his or her will. Joseph did not seek enslavement, Daniel did not engineer his exile, and Esther did not likely intend to marry a Gentile. Each accepted the reality of his or her subjugation and through divine providence, at least in the cases of Joseph and Esther, and was given a high position in pagan courts in order to save God's people from extinction. Neither of these individuals was trained by their faith communities to infiltrate the system in order to make the world a better place. Through a series of unlikely events that are best understood as divine providence, they found themselves in positions that they had every reason to avoid.

Elsewhere Yoder highlights that this diasporic reconfiguration of God's people eventually began to weaken the ethnocentric spine of Jewish identity by introducing a greater degree of freedom: "Not only were Gentiles able to join the synagogue community; children of Jewish parents could also lose themselves in the crowd. Sometimes, in fact, the surrounding pressure exerted on Jews a positive pressure to abjure; thus Jewish identity persisted because it was voluntary. Persons who could have done otherwise took it on themselves, wittingly and at some cost, to reaffirm as adults the identity of their fathers."[84] This development is important for Yoder's trajectory approach. God's people went from being ethnically-based and involuntary (in Palestine),[85] to being ethnically-based and voluntary (in diaspora), to ultimately becoming transethnic and voluntary (in Christ).[86] By the time of John the Baptist, birthright is not enough and a faith like Abraham is required (Matt 3:9-10). The Apostle Paul incorporated this principle into his mission to the Gentiles.[87]

This sociological shift went hand in hand with a theological shift that deeply impacted Israel's view of God and the direction of world history. Yoder identifies eight components of this new "not in charge" *Weltanschauung*. (1) Since God is sovereign over

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[84] Yoder, "Judaism as a Non-non-Christian Religion," in *JCSR*, 155.

[85] Though being born into a Jewish family in Palestine obligates one to be a Jew, Yoder points out that a voluntary dynamic nonetheless persists as evident in the ministries of priests and prophets who exhorted God's people to make voluntary responses of the heart to God's covenant. He also notes that, according to psalmists, there is a moral component to who may ascend God's holy hill. Not just any Jew may approach Zion, only those with pure hearts (e.g., Pss 24 and 15). Cf. "Introduction," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 10.

[86] Though Yoder believed Israel had an ethnic base, he points out that it was never an ethnically pure people ("Introduction," in *Priestly Kingdom*, 10). A cursory glance at Jesus' genealogy in Matthew 1 suffices to demonstrate Israel's relative hybridity (e.g., Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba). Yoder also recognized (to his chagrin) that Christianity did not remain a purely voluntary people, as evident in the practice of infant baptism ("Judaism as a Non-non-Christian Religion," in *JCSR*, 155).

[87] Yoder, "If Abraham," in *Original Revolution*, 110.

world history, his people need not seize political sovereignty or subvert the sovereignty

of others. (2) Since it is the task of the coming Messiah to establish a truly righteous

social order among the nations, it is presumptuous if not blasphemous for God's people

to take such matters into their own hands. (3) Since God chose not to bless the efforts of

Maccabeans, Zealots, and Bar Kochba to restore national kingship, his people should

avoid following their example. (4) Since God sometimes elects to punish his people for

their sins using the sword of the nations, it is impious, not to mention futile, for them to

interfere with that purpose. (5) Since God sometimes uses the suffering of his people to

sanctify his name and balance the moral scales of history, it is inappropriate for them to

avoid such suffering at all costs.[88] (6) Since blood is sacred and belongs to God alone,

and since blood-shedding denies human dignity, violates God's protection of his own

image in the victim, and is the root social sin from which all structural evils evolved,

God's people ought to avoid it altogether. (7) Since God has personally guaranteed

Israel's survival, God's people must not take their survival into their own hands. (8)

Since God is the one true God and thus God over all the nations and since God has

scattered the Jews throughout various nations (crossing local, imperial, and continental

lines), God's people must pursue mission without provincialism and cosmopolitan vision

without empire.[89]

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[88] This component (also discussed in Yoder, "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," in *JCSR*, 83) may seem especially insensitive in a post-holocaust milieu. One should note, however, that Yoder is simply echoing a line of thinking he learned from post-holocaust Jews. Cf. Steven Schwarzschild, "Introduction," in *Roots of Jewish Nonviolence*, eds. Steven Schwarzschild, et al. (Nyack, NY: Jewish Peace Fellowship, 1981). Yoder's close friendship and decades-spanning dialogue with Rabbi Schwarzschild is documented in *JCSR*, 12-19.

[89] This list is a compilation from Yoder, "See How They Go," 190-91, and "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," 73-75 and 82-84, in *JCSR*. Others could be added, but this list is representative of a Jewish ethos that Yoder recognizes as being theologically grounded and sociologically sustained in the Jeremianic turn.

We thus see how theology and sociology are linked in Yoder's narration. A change in one often requires or already constitutes a change in the other. Sometimes the theology changes first and the sociology needs to catch up; at other times, the order is reversed. Their fundamental inter-relationship nonetheless remains constant.

In both theology and sociology, these communities—in most respects—stand in fundamental continuity not only with pre-monarchical Israel but also with post-Pentecost churches. This is Yoder's point. Many scholars rightly affirm that Jesus signaled an era in world history during which God's people did not need the sword-backed state to forge and secure their identity, but God's people could and should have left statehood behind long before. If Yoder is right that the monarchical phase was not the center of Jewish history but an unfortunate detour that Jeremiah began to correct, then ecclesiological reflection ought to avoid monarchical models for the Church and carefully consider what the Jeremianic model and the canonical trajectory that paved its way have to offer. This trajectory would lack ecclesial relevance, however, if the post-exilic restoration projects of Ezra and Nehemiah succeeded in reversing the Jeremianic turn and reinstituting the kingship. We must now turn our attention to Yoder's narration of these events.

## Post-Exilic Confirmation

From Yoder's perspective, Israel's diasporic status did not end with the Persia-sponsored return, restructure, and refortification that is narrated in the canonical books Ezra and Nehemiah. The Jews did not return to claim their own land and realize God's eschatological promises; they returned to occupy a Persian province in ways approved by the Persian overlord. Yoder's engagement of the legacy of the persons Ezra and

Nehemiah varies. Sometimes he narrates their projects positively, other times neutrally, and still others quite negatively.

Yoder most positively narrates Ezra's return from exile in his earlier writings. In *Politics of Jesus*, he charitably recalls Ezra's negative response to Artaxerxes' commission to return to Palestine to institute Torah reforms *with the protection of an armed escort* (Ezra 8). Yoder extols Ezra's refusal of that escort as a commendable example of the YHWH war conviction that God alone is his people's source of protection.[90] More often than not, however, Yoder narrates the work of Ezra and Nehemiah (and other post-exilic restorationists) more neutrally. Their projects offer evidence that, after the partial return from exile, the Jewish people in Judea are established in diasporic fashion without king and without independent statehood. Indeed the resettlement in Judea, according to Yoder, "assumed and ratified ceremonially the legitimacy of the Persian Empire."[91] Ezra and Nehemiah had to explore what it looks like for the Jeremianic shift to make its way back to Palestine and impact life even there.[92]

Yoder's tone hardens, however, in later writings where he describes Ezra and Nehemiah as politicking elders and pawns of the Persian Empire. In one place Yoder lumps them together with David, Solomon, and the Maccabees as those whose nation-building projects collapsed.[93] In another he pairs them with the New Testament Sadducees as the "restorative elite" who did their best to defend Jewish values by

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[90] Yoder, "God Will Fight for Us," in *Politics of Jesus*, 82-83.

[91] Yoder, "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," in *JCSR*, 88, n. 8.

[92] Yoder, "Exodus and Exile," 306; "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," 71, and "See How They Go," 188, in *JCSR*; and "To Your Tents," 352.

[93] Yoder, "The Power Equation," in *For the Nations*, 141.

rebuilding and managing the Jerusalem Temple with imperial support only to fail for lack of divine support.[94] Yoder's most harsh assessment comes in "See How They Go with Their Face to the Sun." In a section of this essay titled "Further Testing," Yoder tentatively suggests that "to take Jeremiah seriously, it would seem to me as a lay reader not versed in historic de- and re-construction, that both of them need to be seen as inappropriate deviations from the Jeremiah line, since each of them reconstituted a cult and a polity as a branch of the pagan imperial government."[95] It should not be forgotten, however, that Yoder qualifies this interpretation. It is a suggestion requiring further testing, not a hard fast conclusion. Nonetheless, the negativity of his tone is unmistakable.

Whether negative, neutral, or positive, Yoder's reading of the post-exilic rebuilding project is consistent with his overall narration. Once the monarchy had collapsed and God began a new trajectory for his people, it never truly recovered. The restorative projects of Ezra and Nehemiah did not revive monarchical existence for Israel; they amounted to Persia-sponsored adaptations to post-monarchical existence.

Yoder acknowledges that this did not stop certain Second Temple Jewish groups from seeking to recover the monarchical model. He frequently mentions the Maccabean project, which gained short-term national independence for Israel in the second century. Though their efforts did not endure, their tradition was kept alive by certain Jewish nationalists, zealots, and messianic pretenders. Yoder's assessment of this lingering monarchical strand is twofold. First, these Jewish groups do not speak for the entire

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[94] Yoder, "On Not Being in Charge," in *JCSR*, 170.

[95] Yoder, "See How They Go," in *JCSR*, 193-94.

Jewish tradition. There were always Jews who regarded them as deviations from the divine will. Second, God accredited none of these movements with success. The mere presence of detractors from what Yoder regards as the canonical trajectory does not invalidate that trajectory; it only tests it. Were such groups to achieve long-term success and were their alleged messiahs somehow confirmed by God, then their experiences would challenge Yoder's narration. By the time of Jesus, however, none of them succeeded and none of them received the Messiah's endorsement.[96]

## New Testament Continuation

Yoder's Old Testament narration would not be complete without recognizing how it continues into the New Testament. In particular, it is important to acknowledge the various ways Yoder sees the New Testament furthering the Jeremianic trajectory, especially as it pertains to the end of Israelite statehood and the ongoing diasporic shape of God's people. Six components of Yoder's New Testament narration, drawn from both the ministry of Jesus and the witness of first century churches, suffice to establish this continuity:

1. Jesus rejects the various forms of monarchy-privileging Maccabean strategy that various Jewish groups advocated in his day (including zealots, Herodians, Sadducees) and makes no attempt to establish a traditional monarchical or palestinocentric reign.[97]
2. Jesus challenges worldly rulers' claims to be benefactors, as well as their way of ruling (Luke 22:26). Instead, he assumes the suffering servant posture and calls his disciples to follow suit.[98]

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[96] Yoder discusses this Maccabean strand in too many places to list here. Representative examples include "On Not Being in Charge," 170-171, and "See How They Go," 186, 191, and 193-194, in *JCSR*; and "Are You the One Who Is to Come?" 201, and "The Power Equation," 141, in *For the Nations*.

[97] Yoder, "Original Revolution," in *Original Revolution*, 19-27.

[98] Yoder, "Behold My Servant Shall Prosper," 151-167; and "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," 71, in *JCSR*; and "Original Revolution," in *Original Revolution*, 29-30.

3. Jesus proclaims a non-national kingdom with citizens who are committed to peacemaking, enemy love, and transnational disciple-making in ways that work against ordinary monarchical structures that take a more suspicious and violent stance toward foreigners.[99]

4. The earliest missionary expansion of the Church follows the diaspora model. The Apostle Paul, for example, goes first to the synagogues that resulted from the dispersion of Jeremiah's day. When rejected by the synagogue, he plants churches whose lives resemble synagogues in many ways.[100]

5. The earliest churches accept subjection to pagan political structures and a non-retaliatory posture toward injustices suffered with the assurance that God has other means of punishing lawbreakers and persecutors (Rom 12:14-13:7; Titus 3:1-11; 1 Pet 2:13-3:18).[101] Moreover they pray for governing structures in keeping with Jeremiah's exhortation and rationale for doing so (1 Tim 2:2-3, cf. Jer 29:7).[102]

6. The earliest Christians viewed themselves as aliens, exiles, strangers, dispersed ones, and those whose citizenship is in heaven (not Rome or Jerusalem).[103]

For Yoder, Jesus truly changed the course of world history in ways that impacted the shape of God's people, especially as it pertains to the global mission and inclusion of the Gentiles.[104] In Yoder's narration, these changes took place within a trajectory already established since Jeremiah. Jesus did not pioneer a new way for God's people to relate to pagan governing structures, a new vision of life for God's people outside of Palestine, or a new attitude toward the monarchical posturing of God's people in the world. In all of these ways, Jesus continued the Jeremianic trajectory. He did not replace the Old

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[99] Yoder, "I Have Called You Friends," 30-36, and "What are You Doing More than They?" 47-56, in *He Came Preaching Peace*; and "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," in *JCSR*, 72.

[100] Yoder, "Exodus and Exile," 306-309; and *JCSR*, 33-34, 36 n.9, 50-52, 56, 78, 96-97, 122, 151-152, and 170-172. Moreover, the cumulative effect of Yoder's argument in "It Did Not Have to Be," in *JCSR*, 43-66, is that the earliest Christian communities were, in essence, scattered messianic Jewish synagogues for over a century.

[101] Yoder, "Let Every Soul Be Subject," in *Politics of Jesus*, 193-210.

[102] Jeremiah 29:7 instructs them to pray for the city's welfare because the Jews' welfare was connected to that of the city. First Timothy 2:2-3 instructs them to do so in order that the Christians may live a quiet and peaceable life.

[103] Phil 3:20; Jas 1:1; 1 Pet 1:1, 17; and 2:11.

[104] Yoder, "Original Revolution," in *Original Revolution*, 28-29.

Testament's prophetic vision for the shape of God's people; he announced that what the prophets began to envision and longed to see was materializing more concretely now that the Kingdom of God is at hand (Matthew 13:17).

## Recapping Yoder's Narration of Israel's History

These two chapters have drawn together various components of Yoder's Old Testament narration from multiple places. Forty different essays have been consulted, though there are more, and a single coherent narrative has emerged. In it, Yoder does not simply showcase a plurality of divergent voices beckoning Jesus to come and settle their internecine dispute. Nor does he advocate a kind of continuity reading that charitably narrates the providential rise of monarchy, its glorious peak under David and Solomon, its lamentable deterioration and eventual collapse, and its promising partial post-exilic recovery. Rather, according to Yoder's canonical-directional reading, we need not choose between plurality and continuity. When it comes to the Old Testament narrative, there is plurality in the context of movement in a consistent direction. Whatever deviates from this trajectory, whether theologically or ecclesiologically, may be regarded as unfaithful on grounds internal to both testaments.

The ecclesiological ramifications of this narration are numerous. Yoder has shown us that the Old Testament is not simply the preface to the formation of the Church, but the very process of that formation. That process teaches God's people (a) to trust him alone as the foundation of their peoplehood, (b) to leave their old way of life behind so they might mediate God's new way to the nations, (c) to unite around a particular way of life that is dictated by God's reign, (d) to recognize the plurality of leaders God supplies rather than subsume all rule under a single human head, (e) to avoid the nations' ideas of

power and responsibility that lead God's people into unfaithfulness and idolatry, (f) to embrace what appears to be a lowly posture of service as the path to global significance, and (g) to accept the exilic or diasporic stance as God's chosen way to send his people into the world as those who are set apart from it. Before detailing the full ecclesiological implications of these lessons, we must critically engage the narration that teaches them. How has the wider scholarly community received Yoder's Old Testament narration? Is it viable from an historical and canonical perspective? Can it stand under the criticism it has received? I submit that it can, but not without significant revision.

CHAPTER 5: ADDRESSING PRELIMINARY OBJECTIONS TO YODER'S OLD
TESTAMENT NARRATION

**Introduction**

Yoder's Old Testament narration has received little attention because it has not

been easily accessible. One must pore over dozens of articles scattered about multiple

books and journals. However, Yoder's death a little over a decade ago has sparked an

increased interest in assessing his life's work, and the posthumously published *Jewish-*

*Christian Schism Revisited* has recently increased the visibility of both his Old Testament

narration and the common objections to it.[1]

To enter the fray of scholarly conversation pertinent to Yoder's narration is to

enter somewhat volatile territory. Though relatively silent during his life, critics have

emerged *en masse* following Yoder's death, raising strong objections to his narration

without necessarily engaging it holistically or exegetically. Their various charges against

Yoder include Marcionism, supersessionism, modernism, foundationalism, and anti-

Ezraism, among others.[2] If all these accusations were accurate, Yoder would be the

wrong person to consult in order to exemplify how the Old Testament may be

appropriated for ecclesiology. Though it is tempting to circumvent these thorny issues

and directly address the exegetical substance of Yoder's narration, the issues raised

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[1] As noted previously, *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* [hereafter *JCSR*] (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), was published with an editorial preface, running commentary, and afterword by Peter Ochs and Michael Cartwright. These editorial additions provide a helpful glimpse into some of the most common objections to Yoder's Old Testament narration from both a Jewish and a Christian perspective.

[2] Each of these charges is documented and engaged below.

represent the kinds of challenges facing those seeking to draw upon an unwieldy and theologically-charged source like the Old Testament for ecclesiology. Issues pertaining to divine constancy, Jewish-Christian relations, and various hermeneutical approaches will need to be addressed directly.

Thus, before offering a fair textual evaluation and revision of Yoder's Old Testament narration, this chapter addresses several of the misunderstandings that have inhibited such an evaluation. Though the contributions of Yoder scholars who have sought to disentangle his work from unwarranted objections will be highlighted, Yoder's own work often sheds important light on these same issues. In many cases, a fresh defense of Yoder's position is also required as a comprehensive account of his Old Testament narration has not yet been articulated in or engaged by the academy. This must be done not simply to gain a respectable hearing for Yoder's narration, but also because the ecclesiological use made of Yoder's narration in this essay depends in many ways upon its standing under the scrutiny to which it has been subjected.

Yoder's Old Testament narration is not, however, innocent of all charges leveled against it. Scholars are correct about many of its shortcomings even when wrong about some of the implications. Several of the limitations they highlight do not invalidate Yoder's project so much as indicate additional work to be done or showcase the fact that his narration does not agree with their preferred methodology and/or theological convictions. They have not proven Yoder's narration to be textually unsustainable but theologically incompatible with key features of their own projects that are not clearly stated in the text itself. The way forward through such impasses is exegetical, requiring further dialogue about the meaning of the text itself.

This chapter divides objections to Yoder's Old Testament narration into two categories: methodology and theology. These categories are not mutually exclusive, nor are they independent from particular readings of the biblical text. Indeed, as shown below, specific theological objections are directly connected to methodological objections and are also dependent upon assumed biblical support. They are addressed separately here not to deny their interconnectedness but to make visible both the diverse angles from which objections are raised and the diverse angles from which they may be answered.

## Methodological Objections

A first set of objections to Yoder's Old Testament narration revolves around method. Some have criticized Yoder for selectively reading Scripture and ignoring key passages, some for reading the New Testament back into the Old, others for rooting part of his narration in events that did not take place in history, and still others for being too dichotomous in his analysis. These four methodological reservations will be dealt with in turn.

### Reading Selectively

Yoder's Old Testament narration is far from exhaustive, yet scholars have not critiqued it simply on this account. Rather, in two different ways, they have identified missing components that Yoder's highly selective Old Testament narration must account for precisely because they are relevant to his narration. The first form of selectivity entails failure to discuss relevant books and events in the Old Testament. James Reimer points out that Yoder never truly engages the substance of Torah, which is so essential to

understanding the dynamics of Israel's life.[3] Schlabach adds that Yoder's unrelenting

emphasis on the problems of Constantinianism (how *not* to live in the land) has kept him

from seeing the possible solutions that a careful reading of Deuteronomy 6-9 would offer

(how properly to live in the land).[4] Cartwright claims that Yoder largely ignores the post-

exilic literature, which would presumably compromise his reading of that period.[5] I

would also add that Yoder's narration would be strengthened considerably had he given a

more robust account of the flood, Jacob, Torah, Judges, Psalms, wisdom literature, post-

exilic refortification, and apocalyptic portions of Daniel.[6]

Yoder's Old Testament narration is selective in a second way that is closely

related to the first. That is, he routinely neglects what one might call the "other side/s" of

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[3] A. James Reimer, "'I came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it': A Positive Theology of Law and Civil Institutions," in *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder's Contributions to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking*, eds. Ben C. Ollenburger and Gayle Gerber Koontz (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2004), 246-255. Though Reimer tends to mischaracterize much of Yoder's work, especially his work in the Old Testament, he is nonetheless right in highlighting the rather scant attention Yoder pays to the specific content of the laws of Torah. For critiques of Reimer's reading of Yoder, cf. Alain Epp Weaver, *States of Exile: Visions of Diaspora, Witness, and Return* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2008), 167, n. 7; Craig Carter, *The Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001), 114-120, 126-128; and Duane K. Friesen, "Yoder and the Jews: Cosmopolitan Homelessness as Ecclesial Model," in *Mind Patient and Untamed*, 151-155.

[4] Gerald W. Schlabach, "Deuteronomic or Constantinian: What Is the Most Basic Problem for Christian Social Ethics?" in *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 449-461.

[5] Cartwright, "Afterword: 'If Abraham Is Our Father…' The Problem of Christian Supersessionism *after* Yoder," in *JCSR*, 223.

[6] Recent work in the canonical shape of Psalms would bolster Yoder's narration. Cf. Gerald H. Wilson, "The Shape of the Book of Psalms," *Interpretation* 46 (1992): 129-142. Daniel L. Smith-Christopher does not specifically highlight this deficiency in Yoder, but he offers an interpretation of the wisdom literature that is agreeable to Yoder's position in "The Quiet Words of the Wise: Biblical Developments toward Nonviolence as a Diaspora Ethic," in *Character Ethics and the Old Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture*, eds. M. Daniel Carroll R. and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007): 129-151. Though Yoder alludes to the significance of apocalypses in "'To Your Tents, O Israel': The Legacy of Israel's Experience with Holy War," *Studies in Religion* 18, no. 3 (Sum 1989), 355, he never develops it. These omissions as well as the role of priests are addressed in chapter 6.

the story.[7] For example, Yoder highlights the (a) anti-monarchical streams of the Old Testament to the neglect of the pro-monarchical streams, (b) positive accounts of exile to the neglect of the negative, (c) divine involvement in YHWH war violence to the neglect of human participation, (d) conditionality of divine promises to Israel to the neglect of the irrevocability of certain promises, and (e) diminishing importance of Jerusalem, temple, and land to the neglect of the eschatological significance of these. Such neglect could be multiplied many times over and the fact would remain that Yoder simply told the Old Testament story the way he saw it and felt no need to seriously engage (at least in print) either those passages that did not agree with his telling or rival interpretations to his way of understanding a given passage.

The cumulative effective of these omissions appears devastating for Yoder's narration, but this need not be the case for at least four reasons. To begin with, failure to include all possible voices and engage every possible interpretation does not disqualify a position from being correct. It is poor scholarly etiquette and makes Yoder susceptible to premature dismissal, but one must still prove Yoder's argument wrong by either showing his narration to be false or by offering a more compelling one.

Secondly, Yoder may not have offered a more comprehensive account because he did not feel qualified to do so. As noted previously, Yoder considered himself to be an amateur in Old Testament studies, and he relied heavily upon the work of specialists in that field. Yoder's Old Testament narration thus relies heavily upon the well-documented and thoroughly-argued insights of first-rate Old Testament scholars. He relies on the work of scholars such as Norman Gottwald, Walter Brueggemann, and Gerhard von Rad

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[7] E.g., Cartwright, "Afterword," in *JCSR*, 216-19; and Reimer, "I came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it," in *A Mind Patient and Untamed,* 251-52.

on a regular basis since they had done the kind of work he did not feel qualified to do.

Since Yoder has read their works and finds their arguments persuasive, he simply

appropriates their positions and puts them to work for his purposes. In this way, Yoder

serves as a bridge between biblical studies and ethics. His project was not to find or

validate precious Old Testament pearls but to string them together and present them to an

audience that may not appreciate them otherwise.

Third, one of the distinguishing characteristics of Yoder's work was its seldom-

paralleled breadth. Yoder wrote scores of essays on a wide variety of topics as they were

assigned to him. At some point he must have been forced to choose between publishing

more work at a lower level of documentation or less work at a higher one. He chose the

former. Yoder's chosen *modus operandi* was to read avidly and write prolifically and he

seldom slowed down to dot all the i's and cross all the t's. As a result, his articles often

lack the level of documentation that his readers would prefer and that the academy would

require. This does not invalidate his position, but it does leave it to his advocates in the

academy to do the documentary work.

Fourth, one should not assume that Yoder's failure to include all material and

represent all viewpoints undermines the validity of the trajectory he articulates. Yoder

concedes the presence not only of rival interpretations but also of rival strands within the

biblical text, though he does not regard these strands as equal from a canonical

perspective.[8] This was addressed briefly in the previous chapter's discussion of monarchy

and was anticipated in chapter 2's account of Yoder's canonical-directional reading.

Yoder believed that the primacy his narration grants to a particular trajectory is most fully

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[8] E.g., Yoder, "To Serve Our God," in *Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 133.

accredited by the New Testament revelation of Christ. Since Christ is the culmination of Israel's story and truly reveals God's will for his people, Christ constitutes the definitive criterion for validating which viewpoints within the text are being relativized by the text (even as they are being preserved) and which viewpoints are doing the relativizing. It is not enough for critics to point out that Yoder did not represent all voices; one must demonstrate that the trajectory he identified is not actually in the text and is not subsequently confirmed by Christ.

Though the omissions in Yoder's Old Testament narration do not ultimately discredit it, they do weaken it. Those wishing to extend Yoder's work must fill the gaps he left behind. Furthermore, they cannot assume that the Old Testament scholarship upon which Yoder relied so heavily will continue to bear the weight that it did in Yoder's day. They will have to engage the best Bible scholarship in their own day.

## Reading Realistically

Yoder's reading of the YHWH war tradition is heavily dependent upon Millard Lind's *Yahweh Is a Warrior*. It is thus subject to many of the same criticisms. Old Testament scholar J. J. M. Roberts has criticized Lind's reading of the Exodus for theologically extrapolating from events that never happened historically. For instance, Roberts faults Lind for using Exodus 15 to argue that YHWH fought on Israel's behalf, whereas the Israelites themselves simply waited and trusted in his deliverance. This account of the defeat of Pharaoh's army is not reliable according to Roberts because it is poetry and even Babylonian victory poems give sole credit to their gods for victories fought and won by humans. Furthermore, the narrative account of the same events in Exodus 14 does not constitute corroborating evidence since it was written later and thus

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depends on the poetic account. That the Israelites were active participants in the battle against Egypt, in Roberts' telling, is evident in their subsequent battle against Amalek in Exodus 17 in which Israel's troops unambiguously do the fighting.[9] This, of course, is only the beginning of the historical problems for Yoder's YHWH war narration. There is insufficient archeological evidence to support the vast military incursion presupposed by the biblical narrative. Many Old Testament scholars have therefore replaced the conquest model of Joshua with others theories such as peaceful infiltration and/or peasant revolt.[10] Similar claims may be made for numerous events in Israel's history.

Yoder was well aware of such objections. Sometimes he responds that historical reconstructions only strengthen his interpretation. He claims, for instance, that von Rad's supposition of a more peaceful infiltration of Canaan, followed by defensive battles against Canaanite backlash, would only support his reading.[11] More often than not, however, Yoder remained true to his biblical realism as discussed in chapter 2. He focused upon the biblical account being conveyed, not the original events that lay behind it, and he worked freely with many of the basic tools and categories of historical criticism. Yoder sought to identify what the original author was trying to communicate in the author's context and with the literary conventions available at the time the accounts were written. Thus Yoder has no problem using the Old Testament guild's language of

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[9] J. J. M. Roberts, "The End of War in the Zion Tradition: The Imperialistic Background of an Old Testament Vision of Worldwide Peace," in *Character Ethics and the Old Testament*, 122.

[10] Cf. William G. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 37-74.

[11] Yoder, "If Abraham Is Our Father," in *Original Revolution* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 106-107. On 111, n. 7, Yoder draws attention to criticisms of von Rad's reconstruction that advocate "a higher view of the biblical record" than that of von Rad. Yoder describes von Rad's position elsewhere as "debatable" and seems to prefer readings of Joshua that simply question how quick and sweeping the occupation was. Yet this position is not one of mere historical reconstruction. It is supported by biblical evidence in the closing chapters of Joshua and opening chapters of Judges ("To Your Tents," 359).

myth or legend when referring to events in the primeval history, but he specifies that in using them he is not making judgments about historicity but about genre.[12]

Yoder is not concerned with historicity because he is most concerned with how the community that produced and received these texts would have appropriated them into its understanding of who God is, what God is doing in the world, and what that means for God's people. In Yoder's estimation, lack of historicity would only strengthen the degree to which texts reflect the values of the people who produced them. When discussing Old Testament court tales like those of Joseph, Daniel, and Esther, Yoder says, "The less these stories of Hebrew heroes in pagan courts are historical in the modern sense of attestation in the face of doubt as having 'really happened,' the more valid they are as testimonies to the worldview and lived experience of the people of the Jeremianic mission."[13] In Yoder's reckoning, the more control an author has of his or her material the more likely the text will reflect the community's convictions.

These remarks do not mean, however, that historicity meant nothing to Yoder. His point was not that various biblical events did *not* happen but that in many cases where historicity is challenged in the Old Testament, the event's historicity does not determine—whether positively or negatively—the value of the testimony offered by the text and its implications for the Christian community:

> Something really has to have happened. It has to have made a real historical difference, and it undeniably did. The nation of Israel did come into existence and into possession of the land. The kings were in fact called by the prophets to a political strategy of non-alignment, which they could have pursued, rather than one of alliances, which they did choose….The difficulties encountered by modern

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[12] Yoder, "God Will Fight for Us," in *Politics of Jesus*, *Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 83, n. 9.

[13] Yoder, "See How They Go," in *JCSR*, 197, n. 12.

erudition in specifying or "proving" anything much about the having-happened of the very earliest of such events makes no significant difference for our responsibility to render an accounting of the common testimony of the canonical sources.[14]

Yoder's position will not likely satisfy the historical critic, who would call him to fully acknowledge the implications of the "indisputable" evidence, or the conservative Christian apologist who would call for an unambiguous affirmation of the text's historicity and thus validity. Yoder resists making such declarations because he believes they are wrong-headed and only detract from the Church's more fundamental task of discerning and submitting to the implications of the words of the text as they stand. If the Old Testament is to be useful for ecclesiological purposes, an approach like Yoder's may be necessary to prevent the conversation from getting stalled in prolegomena.

## Reading Backwardly

Jewish scholar Jon Levenson opens his important work *Sinai and Zion* with a statement about biblical studies that bears directly on questions about Yoder's method:

> One of the distinctive aspects of the modern study of the Bible…has been the effort to delineate a theology of the Old Testament alone, with minimal or negligible reference to the New Testament….What makes this innovation possible is the awareness that the canon of the Christian Bible, like any canon, flattens historical differences. A canon is a synchronic statement; every book in it, every chapter, every verse is contemporaneous with every other one. But history is diachronic, a film-strip rather than a snap shot. The awareness of this element of change and development, which is obscured by the canonical statement, makes it possible to speak of earlier stages on their own, and not simply in reference to the totality of the book as understood by one confessional community, in this case, the church.[15]

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[14] Yoder, "To Your Tents," 359.

[15] Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 1.

Levenson does not here address Yoder directly, but he sets forth charges that may easily be leveled at Yoder's narration. Part of how Yoder justifies his trajectorial reading of the Old Testament, which confidently identifies certain strands as faithful and others as detours, is its confirmation in the New Testament. Without Jesus, Yoder has a more daunting challenge (though not impossible) if he wants to maintain his current position about the transterritorial direction of God's people. Without Jesus, the antimonarchical voice is just one among many. Without Jesus, Ezra and Nehemiah are the champions of Israel's partially-realized hope. Does Yoder's Christocentric reading of the Old Testament therefore relinquish the positive ground gained by the biblical theology movement? Ochs seems to think so when he links Yoder's tendency to make uncompromising judgments to his "doctrine of fulfilled or messianic time: that in Jesus Christians have the potential to live in fulfilled time."[16]

Though Yoder refuses to set Christ aside for the purposes of reading the Old Testament, he does not abandon the most important gains of biblical theology. He is able to hold the two together precisely because he operates with a canonical-directional approach and a particular *telos*, the kingdom of God, which runs through a particular person, Jesus of Nazareth. A contemporary Jewish reading may have to run through Rabbinic Judaism but, for Yoder, this need not entail a parting of exegetical ways between Jews and Christians.[17] According to Yoder's reading, first century Christianity was one of a variety of first century Judaisms and the ethical and ecclesial implications of

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[16] Ochs, "Commentary" on the preface, in *JCSR*, 40.

[17] Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin, for example, finds Yoder's narration largely persuasive. Cf. "Judaism as a Free Church: Footnotes to John Howard Yoder's *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*," *Cross Currents* 56, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 6-9.

Christianity stand in fundamental continuity with both the Old Testament witness as he

interprets it and the basic ethical and ecclesial form of Rabbinic Judaism as he sees it.[18]

Yoder's Christology causes him neither to arbitrarily read Jesus into all the

suggestive gaps and symbols in the Old Testament nor to circumvent or rehabilitate

ancient events that Christians have struggled to incorporate into their theology. Rather,

Yoder's Christology enables him to read ancient voices as anticipating something about

which they did not have as much information as we do. He expects from them only a

partial understanding of what they are saying—not that they did not know what they

meant to say, but that they knew not the exact form that their speech's fulfillment would

take. Yoder is committed to hearing the ancient voices in their own dialect and during

their own place in world history but, as a Christian, he refuses to evaluate that history in

terms irreconcilable with God's fulfillment of that history in Christ.

## Reading Modernistically

In *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, co-editors Cartwright and Ochs each take

issue with Yoder's tendency to analyze key events in Israel's biblical and postbiblical

history in modernistic dichotomous terms.[19] By this they mean that Yoder routinely

interprets events in light of only two radically-opposed options, one being good and the

other not. They refer to it as binary or Cartesian logic, sometimes associated with

modernity, other times with Greece. They express preference for triadic or polyvalent

approaches that do not exclude the possibility of middle ground. Their primary objection

is against the choices they see Yoder force between landedness and nonlandedness, exilic

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[18] Yoder, "It Did Not Have to Be," 43-66, and "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," 69-89, in *JCSR*.

[19] E.g., Ochs, "Editorial Introduction," 6; "Commentary" on ch. 4, 119-120; "Commentary" on ch. 9, 180; "Commentary" on ch. 10, 203-204; and Cartwright, "Afterword," 215, in *JCSR*.

existence and Maccabean-style occupation, Zionism and NonZionism. Ochs also objects to the distinction Yoder makes between pacifism and nonpacifism, missionary and non-missionary postures.[20] Though this criticism is quite tangential to Yoder's Old Testament narration itself, it must be dealt with since it currently serves to discredit a work that is central to understanding that narration.[21]

This methodological critique seems neither well-founded nor relevant. It is not well-founded because Yoder's position with regard to land is not best described as the choice between two mutually exclusive options. Rather, Yoder's diasporic argument is an attempt to offer a third option to break up the dualism of physical earthly home and spiritual heavenly home.[22] Yoder's third option may be described as temporary exilic homelessness with a citizenship located in heaven that will be realized eschatologically on earth. His support for this is not modern philosophy but the biblical trajectory. It will thus need to be refuted on biblical and not philosophical grounds.

Cartwright and Ochs seemed concerned to bring *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* to bear on the important ecumenical question as to whether contemporary Jews still justifiably possess a vested interest in Palestinian real estate. For this reason they therefore hear Yoder saying, to their chagrin, that the only valid form of Judaism since Jeremiah is diaspora rather than palestinocentrism. This also seems to miss the mark. For

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[20] E.g., Ochs, "Editorial Introduction," 4, and "Commentary" on ch. 9, 180, in *JCSR*.

[21] Ochs and Cartwright did not intend to discredit Yoder's work with their editorial contributions, but conversations with readers have led me to believe that it has nonetheless had this effect. Alain Epp Weaver agrees, cf. *States of Exile*, 166-67, n. 1; and Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin also has reservations about how Yoder's work was presented by its editors, cf. "Judaism as a Free Church," 20, n. 11.

[22] Yoder demonstrates that his approach is an effort to get beyond dualistic logic in "Earthly Jerusalem and Heavenly Jerusalem: A Mis-located Dualism," in *JCSR*, 160-166. Ochs grants that Yoder exemplifies triadic thinking in this chapter ("Commentary" on ch. 8, 167), but apparently considers this an exception.

Yoder, the return projects of Ezra and Nehemiah are examples of Jewish residence in the

land, yet with an exilic posture. This represents a third way, moving beyond the either-or

of landed or exilic.[23] Yoder's views of pacifism and mission are equally polyvalent.[24]

To accuse Yoder of being overly modernistic—even risking a tendency toward

individualism and foundationalism—simply cuts against the grain of Yoder's *oeuvre* with

its stringent critique of precisely these things.[25] It is more appropriate to observe that

Yoder sometimes boils down an argument too simplistically as the choice between two

opposing options. To do so does not make him "modern" or even "Greek," unless we

want to divest these terms of their most common meanings.[26] Yoder's frequent choice of

two poles or options is more likely a combination of literary convention, rhetorical

device, and stylistic preference. This method tells us nothing, however, about the validity

of his Old Testament narration. If the Old Testament narrative as confirmed in Christ

presents God as leading his people into a transterritorial posture—no longer tied to

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[23] Alain Epp Weaver makes similar observations in *States of Exile*, 37-38. The pejorative language Yoder sometimes uses to describe Ezra and Nehemiah's work can obscure this third option, which they represent for Yoder.

[24] For instance, Yoder distinguishes between twenty-nine different varieties of religious nonviolence and takes the just war position quite seriously. Cf. Yoder, *Nevertheless: Varieties of Religious Pacifism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992); and *When War Is Unjust: Being Honest in Just War Thinking*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001).

[25] Ochs suggests that Yoder heads in these modernist directions in "Commentary" on ch. 6, in *JCSR*, 143. Carter, by contrast, captures the non-modern nature of Yoder's project when he characterizes him as a Barthian, postliberal, nonfoundationalist, and non-relativist social ethicist in *Politics of the Cross*, 226-229. For essays in which Yoder spells out his nonfoundationalist epistemology, see "But Do We See Jesus," in *Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 46-62; "Meaning after Babble: With Jeffrey Stout Beyond Relativism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24:1 (Spr 1996): 125-139; "On Not Being Ashamed of the Gospel," *Faith and Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (July 1992): 285-300; "'Patience' as Method in Moral Reasoning: Is an Ethic of Discipleship 'Absolute'?" in *The Wisdom of the Cross*, 24-42; and "Walk and Word: The Alternatives to Methodologism," in *Theology without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 77-90.

[26] One wonders if the Qumranite and Johannine literature would be considered "modern" or "Greek" on such grounds.

Palestine in more than a symbolic or eschatologically significant way—then this part of Yoder's narration should be affirmed regardless of whether he pits it against one, two, or three competing options.

## Theological Objections

A second set of objections to Yoder's Old Testament narration pertains to theology. Yoder has been accused both of reading faulty theological presuppositions into the Old Testament narrative (Marcionism and pacifism) and for narrating the Old Testament history in such a way as to yield problematic theological repercussions (divine militarism and supersessionism). The task of this section is to determine whether these objections compromise Yoder's narration as much as their advocates suspect. Though the theological presuppositions are addressed relatively quickly, the theological repercussions require more extensive analysis. Though it would take a full monograph to place these theological topics within the broader history of scholarship and the current state of the debate, it is possible here only to note those who have objected to Yoder's reflection on these topics and to formulate a response to their objections that is consistent with the shape of Yoder's project.

### Marcionism

A little over a decade ago, Mennonite scholar John Miller published the provocatively-titled essay: "In the Footsteps of Marcion: Notes toward an Understanding of John Yoder's Theology."[27] In this article, Miller engages a handful of statements Yoder makes about Marcion in the context of classroom lectures about the formation of

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[27] John Miller, "In the Footsteps of Marcion: Notes Toward and Understanding of John Yoder's Theology," *Conrad Grebel Review* 16, no. 2 (1998): 82-92.

the Christian canon.[28] Miller claims that Yoder walks in Marcion's footsteps because he (a) presents Marcion as a "pioneer in the quest for a norm of faithfulness," (b) highlights the longstanding fluidity of canon formation until the sixteenth century, (c) claims that the Church never made an official ruling on the Old Testament's canonical status, (d) views the story of Jesus as the canon within the Christian canon, and (e) agrees with Marcion that the revelation of God in Jesus supersedes all others and that Christ marks the beginning of a new aeon in human history.[29]

Miller's thesis has not been received warmly by scholars familiar with Yoder's work and with good reason.[30] Miller's claim requires one to turn a blind eye not only to the context and substance of Yoder's argument in *Preface to Theology*, but also to Yoder's criticism of Marcionite readings of the Old Testament,[31] Yoder's statements about the indispensability of the Old Testament alongside the New as a witness to Christ,[32] Yoder's explicit acknowledgement elsewhere that Christians recognized the

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[28] Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002), 174, 177. Before being prepared for publication in 2002, the material in this book circulated as mimeographed transcripts from audio-taped lectures that Yoder delivered at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, IN, from the 1960's until 1981. This partially accounts for the occasional tone of Yoder's remarks as opposed to the carefully nuanced and copiously documented argumentation that one would expect of a scholarly publication. Stanley Hauerwas and Alex Sider write a helpful introduction to *Preface to Theology* that locates this work in its Mennonite context as well as within Yoder's work as a whole (9-29).

[29] Miller, "In the Footsteps of Marcion," 83-86.

[30] Carter, *Politics of the Cross*, 50-51; Mark T. Nation, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 114, n. 18; and A. Weaver, "On Exile," in *Mind Patient and Untamed*, 181, n. 17. Reimer seems more amenable to Miller's thesis; cf. "I Came Not to Abolish the Law," in *Mind Patient and Untamed*, 256-59.

[31] Yoder, "Introduction," 17-19, in Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980).

[32] Yoder, "Use of the Bible in Theology," in *To Hear the Word* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 74. Cf. also Yoder and Richard Mouw's shared statement that both Anabaptists and Calvinists "cultivate a strong emphasis on the Old Testament as 'promise' and the New as 'fulfillment,'" in

Hebrew Bible as canon,[33] and the numerous articles in which Yoder seriously engages the Old Testament for Christian thought and practice.

Nowhere in his brief treatment of Marcion (or anywhere else) does Yoder uphold the wedge that Marcion is said to have driven between the God of the Old and New Testaments. Rather, Yoder's focus was to teach his students key lessons about the complexity of history and canonicity. Toward that end, Yoder highlights that all we know about Marcion comes from the pen of his accusers and that the process of canonization is not as simple as is often thought. The enigmatic figure of Marcion therefore represents both the complex process by which Christians came to recognize certain texts as Scripture and the pressing need for believers to appeal to reliable witnesses in order to identify faithful continuity with the work of Christ and mission of God's people. Yoder's failure to critique Marcion in these particular lectures thus reflects not an endorsement of Marcion's project but focus upon the task he set for himself.

Miller's case is not strengthened by his observation that Yoder and Marcion agree about Christ's centrality to the biblical canon and the newness of the aeon he inaugurated. Marcion was not declared a heretic because of his high view of Christ but his low view of Israel's God as revealed in the Old Testament. Far from divorcing Israel's God from Jesus, it has been demonstrated in chapters three and four that Yoder's Old Testament narration conveys his conviction that the work of Christ and mission of his people stand in fundamental continuity with what Israel's God has been doing through his people since Abraham. Had Yoder actually read a low view of Israel's God into his Old Testament

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"Evangelical Ethics and the Anabaptist-Reformed Dialogue," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 17, no. 2 (Fall 1989), 132.

[33] Yoder, "Judaism as a Non-non-Christian Religion," in *JCSR*, 154.

narration, this would have compromised the usefulness of his account for ecclesiology. Yet this is surely not the case and one is left baffled by Miller's claims.[34]

Pacifism

Evangelical Old Testament scholar, John Goldingay, dismisses at least part of Yoder's Old Testament narration as the "left hand of his Christology."[35] In particular, he dismisses Yoder's pejorative reading of Ezra and Nehemiah. The only evidence Goldingay gives for Yoder's supposed theological motivation is "the context" of Yoder's pejorative comments, namely, an article about Jesus, Martin Luther King Jr., and the concept of power.[36] Since this article advocates a pacifist notion of power, it is apparent that by Christology Goldingay means Yoder's pacifism.

Goldingay is not the only scholar to eschew pacifist readings of the Old Testament. Drawing on multiple passages from Exodus to Zechariah, J. J. M. Roberts argues that Isaiah and Micah's "swords into plowshares" visions should be read in their pro-monarchical contexts and thus not used to prescribe unilateral disarmament in any context, which he claims is typical of the pacifistic Old Testament readings of prominent (unnamed) Christian ethicists. Roberts warns readers not to follow them "in what amounts to a quasi-Marcionite reduction of the Christian canon to a selectively read New

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[34] This needs to be emphasized because those less familiar with Yoder's work are tempted to regard Miller as an authority because of his participation with Yoder in the Concern group of young Anabaptist leaders who gathered in Amsterdam in the early 1950's. Reimer notes this affiliation to lend credibility to Miller's critique of Yoder in "I Came Not to Abolish the Law," in *Mind Patient and Untamed*, 252. For a brief account of the Concern group's activities and contributions, cf. Albert N. Kein, *Harold S. Bender: 1897-1962* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 450-471.

[35] John Goldingay, *Israel's Gospel*, vol. 1 of *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 764, fn. 86.

[36] Yoder, "The Power Equation, the Place of Jesus, and the Politics of King," in *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 141.

Testament" but instead "to reflect on a possible reason for the larger canon."[37] He then observes that the New Testament was written to address believers who had no political power and were thus unable to help govern the state. In contemporary Europe and North America, however, Christians live in situations more akin to the Old Testament Israelites in so far as God's people have "the power and responsibility to govern according to God's will."[38] Thus, in Roberts' estimation, the Old Testament is inherently nonpacifistic and all attempts to read it as such are distortions that eclipse the important resources the Old Testament provides Christians for being ethically responsible in today's context.

The charge of reading one's theological presuppositions into the Old Testament is a difficult one to answer. How one reads Scripture is always informed by theological presuppositions and each reading of Scripture simultaneously forms the presuppositions one will take into the next reading. It is tempting to answer this charge by noting that Yoder adopted a majority of the components of his narration from Old Testament scholars from ecclesial traditions not historically associated with pacifism. Yet even such corroboration would be nullified by the fact that some of these scholars may be pacifists themselves. Of course, if scholars read enough passages that support a pacifist narration then one would expect them to embrace the pacifist implications of such passages, which would then serve to disqualify them as impartial witnesses. Is there a way beyond such circularity?

Yoder was keenly aware of the question of objectivity and he reflects upon it at length with reference to his telling of the Jewish story from Abraham through

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[37] Roberts, "The End of War in the Zion Tradition: The Imperialistic Background of an Old Testament Vision of Worldwide Peace," in *Character Ethics and the Old Testament*, 127.

[38] Roberts, "The End of War," in *Character Ethics and the Old Testament*, 127-128.

contemporary Jewish history.[39] Though the focus of his reflection is postbiblical Judaism,

it remains quite relevant to his Old Testament narration. Though Yoder confesses that

"every reader of the Jewish story tailors out of the great variety his/her own Abraham,

his/her own Jeremiah," he refuses to settle for simplistic notions of relativity, saying "to

be satisfied with this sweeping relativity is not enough. It denies the reality of the specific

history, enshrining the observer's own identity as a functional absolute."[40] Yoder elects

not to meet this challenge with a logical instrument or statistical method that bypasses

particular or provincial data in favor of universal or abstract principles that attempt to

remove one from the fray and position one as an impartial observer. Instead, he grants the

inevitability of interpreting Jewish identity in terms of his own identity and seeks to

ameliorate the liabilities of this eventuality:

> We cannot not be selective; we can ask that the selectivity should contribute to reciprocal recognition, finding in the other what one needs, for the sake of one's own integrity, to esteem.
>     I make then no apology for reading the vast melee of the Jewish experience in such a way that Yochanan is more representative than Menachem, Abraham Joshua Heschel than David Ben Gurion, Arnold Wolf than Meir Kahane, Anne Frank than Golda Meir. What goes on here is *not* that I am 'co-opting' Jews to enlist them in my cause. It is that I am finding a story, which is really there, coming all the way down from Abraham, that has the grace to adopt me.[41]

Yoder's intentions are clear, but this only positions his testimony over against that

of his accusers. Are there ways, then, to determine whether or not Yoder's narration is

driven by his pacifist agenda? This may be the wrong question to ask. Rather we are

better served to ask questions like these: Is Yoder's Old Testament narration internally

consistent? Is Yoder's reading of this or that particular passage persuasive based on its

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[39] Yoder, "Jewishness of the Free Church Vision," in *JCSR*, 112-116.

[40] Yoder, "Jewishness of the Free Church Vision," in *JCSR*, 113.

[41] Yoder, "Jewishness of the Free Church Vision," in *JCSR*, 115 (original emphasis).

appropriateness to the passage's immediate and wider canonical contexts? Does Yoder's

overall narration account for the wide range of biblical materials better than rival

narrations? In short, Yoder's narration should be evaluated on the same basis as every

other attempted narration. The next chapter is dedicated to that task, but first we must

discuss two anticipated repercussions of Yoder's Old Testament narration that could

serve to discredit it.

## Divine Militarism

Though some scholars fault Yoder's Old Testament narration for being too

pacifistic, others fault it for being too violent. Ray Gingerich, for instance, offers a strong

ethical critique of Yoder's theological project based on a careful reading of his relevant

works.[42] Gingerich holds as axiomatic that "an enduring ethics of nonviolence cannot

finally be grounded in a theology of violence" and accuses Yoder of doing exactly this.[43]

Though Gingerich affirms Yoder's commitment to a pacifist ethic rooted in the life and

teaching of Jesus, he cannot affirm that the God who is revealed in Jesus is the warrior

God of Israel.[44] Gingerich's proposed solution is to forsake the divine warrior image and

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[42] Ray C. Gingerich, "Theological Foundations for an Ethics of Nonviolence: Was Yoder's God a Warrior?" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77, no. 3 (2003): 417-435. Scholars who agree with Gingerich's critique in various ways include Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Jesus Against Christianity: Reclaiming the Missing Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 225 ff; J. Denny Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 205-209; and, to a lesser extent, Alain Epp Weaver, "On Exile," in *Mind Patient and Untamed*, 180-181, n. 14.

[43] Gingerich, "Theological Foundations," 418.

[44] Though Yoder does not pursue this route, one might engage Gingerich's thesis on its own terms and test whether there truly is a logical contradiction. Many assumptions must be tested. Does Jesus' being fully God entail his revealing the fullness of God's response to evil? Could it be that Jesus reveals God's ultimate means of triumphing over evil but not necessarily the full range of divine responses to it? Could not part of what it meant for Jesus to empty himself and become fully human entail renouncing the exclusive divine right to take life (Phil 2:5-11)? Is it not also taught in Scripture that God routinely works through fallen powers to contain evil and has on multiple occasions destroyed the wicked altogether (e.g., flood, Sodom, Ananias and Sapphira, eschatological judgment)? Is it not the case that Scripture teaches us

to concede that some Jews misunderstood God's nature and that their misunderstanding is graphically portrayed in YHWH war texts that ascribe violence to God. Similarly, Alain Weaver objects to Yoder's readiness to associate the loving God of Israel with the brutal slaughter of Canaan. As someone who has been heavily involved in peace-making efforts in the Middle East, Weaver is especially concerned about how such readings have been used to justify more recent "conquests" like the 1948 destruction of over 400 Palestinian villages. [45] Weaver's solution is akin to that of Gingerich: "What Yoder did not do (but, I would contend, should have done) was to argue that other parts of the Scriptural witness correct for the partially defective understanding of God present in the narratives of YHWH war."[46]

*Yoder's Response to the Problem*

Yoder does not follow the paths of Gingerich and Weaver, though he recognizes that the faith community must somehow account for the place of these wars in its story.

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*not* to imitate God's full response to evil (Rom 12:19) but only to imitate God's particular response through Jesus? In "The Disciple of Christ and the Way of Jesus" (in *Politics of Jesus*, 131), Yoder argues persuasively that it is precisely at the point of "the concrete social meaning of the cross in its relation to enmity and power" that we have been called to imitate Jesus. There is only a contradiction between divine violence and Jesus if Jesus' actions and teachings on earth constitute an exhaustive representation of God's responses to evil. Yet there is good reason to think that is not the case. Furthermore, there is no necessary reason to believe that God cannot call his people to participate in only one of his responses to evil (to overcome it with good as exemplified in Christ), whereas he reserves the right to deal with it in other ways through agents of wrath (to punish and contain it), and still other ways himself (to remove it from his sight). Responses of this sort do not satisfy J. Denny Weaver (*Nonviolent Atonement*, 205-209), but they at least demonstrate that Yoder's position is not self-contradictory.

[45] A. Weaver, "On Exile," in *Mind Patient and Untamed*, 180-181, n. 14. For information on Weaver's work in the Middle East, cf. Weaver, *States of Exile*, 11, 215.

[46] A. Weaver, "On Exile," 180-81, n. 14.

Though Yoder deals with such issues in many works,[47] he grapples with them at length in two essays.

In "To Your Tents, O Israel," Yoder offers his most detailed analysis of both the phenomenon of YHWH war and the questions it raises. In particular, he discusses two common approaches to viewing God that impact the degree to which one perceives his participation in YHWH war as a problem.[48] One approach emphasizes the infinite qualitative distinction between the divine and human natures. It confesses that humans cannot comprehend God and that our comprehension is not required. We cannot be certain that divine sanction of genocide is a contradiction unless we have a firm grasp on the nature of divinity, which we lack. Another approach, which Yoder calls the post-Kantian progressive humanization of God, emphasizes that despite God's otherness there are points of contact between humans and God. This is biblically supported by passages that exhort God's people to be holy as God is holy (1 Peter 1:16) and to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48). Since there is some degree of similitude, God's people must wrestle with the seeming contradiction between the violence God commits in the Old Testament and Jesus' insistence that God loves our enemies and calls us to do the same.

Yoder does not choose between these approaches. He notes that the former has the words of canon on its side, though perhaps not "the direction of the canon's

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[47] Cf. the discussion of YHWH war in chapter 4. Yoder's most extensive treatments of YHWH war are as follows: "God Will Fight for Us," in *Politics of Jesus*; "If Abraham," in *Original Revolution*; "Texts That Serve or Texts That Summon: A Response to Michael Walzer," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 20, no. 2 (Fall 1992), 234; and "To Your Tents," 345-362. In most of these places he points readers to Lind's *Yahweh Is a Warrior* as laying the exegetical foundation.

[48] Yoder, "To Your Tents," 360-61.

movement,"[49] and that the latter will only continue to struggle with the problem of war, evil, and the notion of a personal God. Yoder then submits his own approach: "This issue, like the metaphysical puzzle of divine agency, though pertinent and important, need not be resolved for us to be able to read the Hebrew record, and to hear ourselves called to emulate the renunciation of the short-circuited claim to sovereignty which it incarnates."[50] Just as we need not know the history behind a biblical event in order to submit to it as Scripture, we also do not need to resolve the theological and philosophical conundrums that are raised by the text but not answered forthrightly by it.

This evasive response may be consistent with Yoder's biblical realism, it may satisfy those willing to swallow their objections and proceed with the biblical narrative as is, and it may even suffice to proceed with Yoder's Old Testament narration for the purposes of ecclesiological reflection—but it is not Yoder's best answer. This comes in an unpublished essay on the subject of theodicy.[51] In this essay, Yoder's affirmation of the "infinite qualitative distinction" is more transparent although he denies the premise of a contradiction between YHWH war and Christ based on a careful reading of Scripture.

According to Yoder, theodicy is oxymoronic because if God is God then we are inherently unable to evaluate him. From where would we derive our criteria? How would

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[49] I suspect Yoder means by this not that the ontological gap between humans and God has been bridged but that, in Christ, we have come to know God more fully. Humankind's knowledge of God may thus be conceived of as expanding historically with at least three somewhat chronological stages: what all humans can know about God simply by living in his creation (Rom 1:20-21), what the Israelites came to know about God through his various interactions with them (Heb 1:1), and what the apostles came to know about God as most fully revealed in Christ (Heb 1:2-3). There is thus a movement of increasing familiarity with the God who is wholly other and, according to Yoder, this movement establishes a trajectory in which we would expect less warrior-like violence from God and more Christ-like suffering love.

[50] Yoder, "To Your Tents," 361.

[51] Yoder, "Trinity Versus Theodicy: Hebraic Realism and the Temptation to Judge God," (1996) http://theology.nd.edu/people/research/yoder-john/documents/TRINITYVERSUSTHEODICY.pdf [accessed on Feb. 18, 2009].

we know which criteria are right? Why do we think we are qualified to accredit Divinity? If we think we are qualified, how would we discern? What are the lexical rules? To put this in biblical terms, if God's Word is the only reliable way one may come to know God, and if God's Word in Scripture is the primary place one encounters God's all-powerful and all-loving nature as well as his alleged violent nature, then on what basis may one use God's Word against itself? One might just as easily use passages of divine wrath and participation in violence to correct passages of loving goodness. We simply cannot make such discernments without removing God from the position of God, which is when oxymorons escalate into idolatry. If God is truly God, "then the distance between our reality and God's cannot be bridged from our side."[52]

Theodicy, with its implicit attempt to fit God into a systematic framework that lives up to human criteria for coherence, is thus the wrong way to approach the YHWH wars of Scripture. Rather than answer the question posed by theodicy, Yoder substitutes a different kind of question that demands a different kind of response:

> The question is not how to justify God but how to worship and honor Him by believing that the way of Jesus, and the way to which His disciples are called, in which they are empowered by the Spirit, is rooted in the nature and intent of JHWH/Abba. Yet JHWH/Abba, differing from the "God as such" of the theodicists, comes to us identified by a history. We cannot abstract out of the narrative substance of that identity.
> That means we must come to grips with the heritage of the JHWH war in ancient Israel and learn from the message of Jeremiah about the mission to Babylon and from the message of "Isaiah" about the mission of the Suffering Servant….The fitting stance for the Creature is then not to ask whether God meets our accreditation requirements of a god worthy of recognition as such, but to accept the proffered privilege of enlistment in the cause of the healing of the nations.[53]

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[52] Yoder, "Trinity Versus Theodicy," no pagination.

[53] Yoder, "Trinity Versus Theodicy," no pagination.

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In order to truly revere God as God, according to Yoder, one must reckon with his self-disclosure in Christ and in all of Scripture—even those parts that are least amenable to our well-formulated biblically-based systems. Yoder's pacifist "system" did not require a pacifist God to complete it; Yoder's system would not be complete had it not accounted for God's self-disclosure in all the events of Scripture, including Israel's YHWH wars.

*Yoder's Alternative Approach*

Yoder refuses to grant that we already know that YHWH wars are incompatible with Christ and that we must somehow find a way to bracket them from our functional canon. He thus regards as legalistic all approaches that do not discuss YHWH war within its concrete historical context and canonical narrative framework.[54] Instead, he interprets YHWH war as constitutive of the storyline that runs through Jeremiah, Isaiah, Jesus, and the Church's mission.[55] This has been discussed at length in the previous chapter and need not be repeated. Here it is helpful to illustrate the kind of concrete contextual reading which Yoder advocates. A thick description of two YHWH wars, the battles of Jericho and Ai, should suffice. Four layers of context are particularly important.[56]

(1) The account of Israel's conquest of Canaan cannot be separated from Israel's calling in general. According to the Pentateuch, God called Israel into existence so that Israel might be a blessing to the nations (Gen 12:1-3). God intended Israel to be a priestly

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[54] Unpublished lecture notes titled, "From the Wars of Joshua to Jewish Pacifism," 2, located in box 117 of the John Howard Yoder archives.

[55] Cf. also "Texts That Serve," 234, where Yoder places the YHWH wars within a trajectory from Miriam to Gideon, to Jeremiah, to Jochanan ben Zakkai, and to Jesus.

[56] This description is my own and not that of Yoder, but it illustrates the kind of reading he points to in various places but does not develop as concretely. He did not have to do so because Gerhard von Rad (in *Holy War in Ancient Israel*) and Millard Lind (in *Yahweh Is a Warrior*) had already done so.

kingdom and holy nation, a people God would bless not for their own sake but for the sake of the world (Exod 19:5-6). The YHWH war narratives are ultimately about Israel's globally significant calling.

(2) The timing and target of the conquest were far from arbitrary. God tells Abraham, in Genesis 15:12-16, that his descendants would be enslaved for four hundred years because the iniquity of the land's inhabitants had not yet reached full measure. Whatever other purposes the Egyptian enslavement served, God refused to simply wipe out innocent people. Instead, he waited until the Canaanites were ripe for judgment even when that meant four centuries of suffering for his own people (Lev 18:24-25).

(3) Because wickedness permeated the land, the battles of Jericho and Ai were equivalent to ritual sacrifices or whole burnt offerings. Moses forthrightly taught the Israelites that God was handing the inhabitants over to them to be *totally* destroyed—not only the male warriors, but all residents and livestock. In addition, their possessions were set apart to be burned (Deut 7:24-26). This is not the typical formula for imperial expansion or territorial defense; nor was it a cruel war tactic that the Israelites concocted to exterminate their enemies. It was God's way of punishing idolatry. It is identical to how the Israelites were taught to deal with their own towns that lapse into idolatry (Deut 13:12-18). The uniqueness of this kind of warfare, even for Israel, is made explicit in Deuteronomy 20:10-18 where Moses contrasts YHWH war with common warfare. The latter begins with gestures for peace and ends with executions of opposing warriors only—not their wives, children, livestock, or possessions. One may thus argue that

YHWH war was more akin to animal sacrifice than human self-advancement at the expense of others.[57]

(4) The battles of Jericho and Ai were God's battles more than those of Israel. Though God involved the Israelites to participate in them, he told them repeatedly that these battles were in his hands not theirs. God fights for them, sends his angel before them, purges the land, and simply commissions them to mop up after him (Exod 23:23, 27-33; Deut 7:1-6, 17-26; 31:3-6; and Josh 5:13-15).

In sum, a thick description of the battles of Jericho and Ai reveals that the Israelites are not drawing upon timeless principles about killing, enemy love, murder, or just warfare. They are following God's seemingly bizarre instructions to pass through a river on dry land, march around a city multiple times, blow trumpets, and wait upon God to do something unexpected before carrying out his orders to burn anything of value that remains. The Israelites' participation in these wars reveals their radical faith to rely upon God alone for their strength, to trust his instructions even when they seem bizarre, and to do the unthinkable out of the conviction that God will keep his promise to somehow use them to bless all nations, contrary to all tangible evidence. With this same attitude of trust, Jeremiah commissions Jews to venture into exile, Daniel and friends serve in foreign lands under duress, Jesus teaches his followers to love their enemies, and the early church goes into all nations spreading the good news of God's peace.

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[57] Though it certainly offends modern sensibilities to speak about the death of humans in this way, we must reckon with the fact that Scripture uses this sort of language. Scripture does not use such language to denigrate humans but to underscore that the Israelites were not participating in normal military bloodshed. God would not allow his people to wage war for material gain, imperial advancement, or ethnic cleansing. Rather, God emphasizes that only he has the right to take life and that the Canaanite battles, from the Israelite's perspective, were about obedience to God and thus worship. From God's perspective they may have also been about judgment upon sin and advancing his plans for the world's salvation, but Israel is not authorized to make such judgments or to create their own strategies for global shalom. The Canaanites' lives were to be taken only because God set them apart for this, similar to how he set certain animals apart to be sacrificed. The comparison between the Canaanites and animal sacrifices should be pushed no further.

Those who would protect the world from genocide today ought to reconsider the strategy of bracketing YHWH wars from the biblical story; for it is only by extracting these wars from that story that they can possibly serve the purpose of legitimating genocide. The way to counteract decontextualized readings of Israel's YHWH wars is not to concede the basis of those readings—that God is authorizing something horrendous—and then theologically excise them from the narrative. The way to counteract such readings is to out-narrate them by offering a truly contextual reading that exposes the absolute incommensurability between biblical YHWH wars and more recent genocides. Precisely because the YHWH wars are both a truly unique phenomenon when analyzed on their own terms and an integral part of a narrative that unfolds in the direction of Christ, we can now confidently say that they may never be waged again.

<div align="center">Supersessionism</div>

A final theologically-grounded critique of Yoder's Old Testament narration involves charges of supersessionism.[58] Consistent with his Marcionite accusations, Miller claims that Yoder's insistence that Jesus reveals a new understanding of God's nonviolent way of overcoming evil leads to "supersessionist beliefs and attitudes toward Israel's story, Israel's scriptures, and Israel's God" as evident in Yoder's negative assessment of nation-states in God's redemptive purposes.[59] In his running commentary

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[58] The glossary of terms furnished in *JCSR* defines supersessionism as "the theological claim that the Church has replaced Israel as God's people for the salvation and blessing of the world" (278).

[59] Miller, "In the Footsteps of Marcion," 89-90. Miller cites as counter-evidence God's alleged "decrees for the nations in Genesis 9:1-6." From God's instructions to Noah and his sons about the sanctity of human life, Miller deduces that "[t]he restraint of violence in the world's nation-states was thus viewed positively as evidence that a decree of their God was in effect in a world he had determined to care for and sustain despite the evil still lurking in the human heart even after the great flood." Miller neither acknowledges nor engages Yoder's interpretation of these same verses, which acknowledges God's

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on Yoder's *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, Peter Ochs both celebrates Yoder's

pioneering movement beyond traditional supersessionism and laments a new form of

supersessionism that Yoder unwittingly leads to. It is not clear what Ochs means by

supersessionism, but his multiple cryptic statements seem to indicate that he mostly

objects to Yoder's supposed insistence that exilic Judaism is normative and thus the only

valid form of Judaism worth engaging and that Rabbinic Judaism is simply a reaction to

Christianity.[60]

    Och's critique of Yoder and nebulous use of the term "supersessionism" are

prolonged by Cartwright in his afterword to *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*.[61]

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gracious intervention on behalf of humankind but is more guarded about the beneficent nature of nation-states for which there is no evidence in this text.

    [60] Ochs, "Editorial Introduction," 40; "Commentary" on ch. 1, 68; "Commentary" on ch. 2; and "Commentary" on ch. 7, 158, in *JCSR*. This new form of supersessionism—the notion that some forms of Judaism are more normative than others—does not seem to match the definition of supersessionism in the glossary of *JCSR*, 278. Ochs is not alone, however, in faulting Yoder for seeking to identify the core essence of Judaism; cf. Boyarin, "Judaism as a Free Church," 15.

    [61] Michael G. Cartwright, "Afterword," in *JCSR*, 205-240. I cannot do justice to the full scope of Cartwright's criticism in this essay. This stems from the difficulty of identifying exactly what Cartwright means by supersessionism. Like Ochs, he grants that Yoder escapes traditional forms of Christian supersessionism insofar as he does not claim that Christians have replaced the Jews as God's people. But then he uses a Yoderism (the use of neo-) to accuse Yoder of both neo- and neo-neo- supersessionisms without giving a precise definition of what he means by these terms. It is thus difficult to distinguish between what Cartwright dislikes in Yoder's account in general (perhaps for ecumenical purposes) and what he believes to be supersessionistic in particular. The glossary definition of supersessionism provided in *JCSR* does not help clarify this. It notes the standard definition of supersessionism (the notion that the Church has replaced Israel) and then notes that Cartwright's usage extends this term's application to "a complex *pluriform* structure of thought and practice that can be discerned at various levels of belief and practice, which can be said to have shaped Christian ecclesiology and the "Christian imagination in a variety of ways in past and present" (278). This explanation does not clarify what precisely makes a Christian belief or practice supersessionistic. The standard definition would indicate that a practice or belief that replaces Israel with the Church would be supersessionistic, but Cartwright and Ochs note that Yoder does not do that. The implied definition seems to be that for a Christian to assert that one particular form of Judaism is normative over and against another is supersessionistic. This kind of assertion, however, is a necessary part of the development of a robust tradition and happens in-house within most healthy and growing traditions. What Cartwright and Ochs may object to is Yoder's boldness in offering an "in-house" corrective, but Yoder's nonsupersessionistic position is not only that Christians have not replaced Israel, but that the two traditions are more closely related to one another than is often believed and thus have more to say to one another. Nonetheless, in the face of such conceptual imprecision, I have chosen to engage two of Cartwright's strongest objections that seem most pertinent to the ordinary use of the term supersessionism.

Cartwright agrees with Ochs that Yoder's emphasis on exilic Jewishness tends to supersede, if not erase, other forms of Judaism that are more grounded in palestinocentric landedness. Furthermore, he faults Yoder for ignoring the covenantal nature of Jewish identity, most conspicuously evident in his failure to engage Romans 9-11 and his decision to root it, instead, in voluntary faith assent.[62] In short, Cartwright contends that Yoder presumptuously believes he knows the essence of Jewishness better than Jews do and that its essence is most fully embodied in Yoder's own Free Church tradition.[63] This makes Yoder an infelicitous dialogue partner.

A full assessment of Yoder's vision for Jewish-Christian relations that would do justice to the complexities of the relevant issues is beyond the scope of this essay. Yet the charge of supersessionism serves to discredit Yoder's Old Testament narration and so it must be engaged. The following five observations are not intended to end the debate, but at least to demonstrate that it is far from clear that Yoder is as susceptible to the charge of supersessionism as some have made him out to be.

First it is worth noting that Yoder himself routinely criticized supersessionism as he understood it. He defines it in "Paul the Judaizer" as the notion that Christianity has replaced or superseded Judaism in such a way that Judaism can or should no longer exist.[64] This definition is consistent with other common understandings of the term. Kendall Soulen, for example, identifies three distinct forms of supersession. Economic supersession holds that in God's redemptive purposes it was necessary for carnal Israel to become obsolete. Punitive supersessionism holds that God has abrogated his covenant

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[62] Cartwright, "Afterword," in *JCSR*, 211.

[63] Cartwright, "Afterword," in *JCSR*, 214.

[64] Yoder, "Preface," 31, and "Paul the Judaizer," 97, in *JCSR*.

with Israel on account of Israel's rejection of Christ. Structural supersessionism narrates the story of Scripture in such a way as to render Israel's role in the Old Testament superfluous to God's saving work in this world.[65] Yoder's sympathetic reconstruction of Israel's history in *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, reinforced by his fuller Old Testament narration, makes it clear that Yoder is not supersessionist in any of the above senses. Nor is supersessionism entailed in Yoder's negative assessment of nation-states and Zionist Judaisms and his positive estimation of biblical voluntarism and diasporic existence. Yoder regarded such matters as critical to the shape of God's people, but not ontological prerequisites for peoplehood.[66]

Second, when evaluating *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, one must be sensitive to what Yoder is seeking to accomplish. He is not seeking to provide a comprehensive theology of Jewish-Christian relations. His aim is succinctly stated in the introduction: "I seek here to articulate one basic alternative perspective, which if correct will call for redefinitions all across the board, even though it cannot be my task to do all that redefining."[67] Yoder's alternative perspective is that careful attention to biblical and postbiblical Jewish history reveals that the split between Jews and Christians did not have to be. There were multiple streams of Judaism, and various messianic streams blended in rather peacefully with them—at least for a time. Eventually, though not inevitably, tensions escalated between them and they diverged in ways that have since taken a

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[65] R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 29-31.

[66] That not all Jews regard Yoder's narration as supersessionistic is evident in the rather forthright words of Daniel Boyarin: "Yoder, I think, truly and successfully supersedes supersessionism" ("Judaism as a Free Church," 12). Boyarin expresses his broad, though qualified, agreement with Yoder's revision, saying, "I agree with nearly every aspect of Yoder's account of the historical revision itself," 8.

[67] Yoder, "Preface," in *JCSR*, 35.

negative toll on them all. Yoder believed that this historical reconstruction may eliminate false assumptions of inherently irreconcilable differences and thus create space for new forms of constructive dialogue. Though it would certainly be a glaring omission in any systematic treatment of Jewish-Christian relations, Yoder's failure to discuss Romans 9-11 reflects that he is not self-consciously providing such a system. Rather, he is calling into question some of the common historical assumptions that impact how one reads Paul's words in Romans.[68]

Third, that Yoder submits a biblical and historical narration that leads him to deem certain ecclesial and rabbinic trajectories as more faithful than others makes him neither a supersessionist nor a closed-minded conversation partner. On the contrary, it makes him a voice that may have something to contribute to the conversation. Whether or not that voice is helpful depends on the strength of its supporting arguments. These must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis according to the best primary sources available. They must not be dismissed in advance because they do not sit well with the presumed narratives and communal expressions of other conversation partners. For Yoder, the act

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[68] Though Yoder's contribution to Jewish-Christian dialogue does not start with or revolve around Romans 9-11, this does not mean Yoder has no account of election and is therefore unable to escape "modern voluntarism" (cf. Cartwright, "Afterword," in *JCSR*, 211). Yoder hints at his approach to this topic in "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," in *JCSR*, 84. He acknowledges two ways that Rabbi Steven Schwarzschild describes God's covenant promise concerning Israel's survival: one is ethical and thus conditional; the other is metaphysical and thus immutable. Yoder does not choose the ethical over the metaphysical. Rather, Yoder states that both are true dialectically and that it is the task of Jewish thinkers to sort out what that means. Given Yoder's conviction that the Apostle Paul was a first century Jew, Yoder likely believed that Paul was wrestling with the implications of this same dialectic in Romans 9-11. These chapters do not reflect the entirety of Paul's convictions about the identity of God's people, but only one moment (albeit a pivotal one) in Paul's struggle with that mystery. One would also have to reckon with Paul's statements elsewhere about this topic. For instance, in Romans 2:28-29, Paul notes that not all who are circumcised physically are Jews and that true Jews are those of a circumcised heart which, according to Deuteronomy 30:6, entails loving YHWH with one's entire self. Rather than pit voluntary against election, Yoder holds them in dialectical tension. This is neither a supersessionist nor modernist move; it is an effort to make sense of the tension evident in Scripture itself.

of presenting a normative vision of faithfulness is itself a Jewish thing to do and a Jewish thing that Jesus did:

> What Jesus himself proposed to his listeners was nothing other than what he claimed as the normative vision for a restored and clarified Judaism, namely the proper interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures and tradition for the present, in light of the New Age which he heralded….Jesus rejected certain other teachings, and he scolded other people, as did all Jewish teachers….The freedom he claimed to redefine was *no greater* than the freedom taken by the earlier prophets and canonical writers as they each in their time had also reworked living traditions, or than the freedom taken by later rabbis.[69]

If Yoder is supersessionist for offering a biblically-rooted vision of communal faithfulness, then so were Jesus, Paul, and other first century Jewish teachers who did the same thing. That Yoder's reconstruction casts palestinocentric expressions of Jewish identity in a negative light does not mean that he denies them a place in the conversation or somehow erases their identity as Jews. It means he regards them as co-heirs of a common tradition worth engaging together even at points of disagreement.

Fourth, Yoder's project must be evaluated on its own terms and that means seriously engaging his claim that Jesus and the earliest Christians not only saw themselves as Jews but truly were Jews (even if in the minority). The implications of this are important, especially against the claims of Ochs and Cartwright that advocating diasporic Judaism constitutes supersessionism.[70] One quote from Cartwright is particularly revealing: "Whereas there is abundant textual evidence for Christian peoplehood that locates what it might mean to be 'a priestly kingdom, a royal priesthood, and a chosen nation' (1 Peter 2:9-10) in the missional context of 'landless diaspora',

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[69] Yoder, "It Did Not Have to Be," in *JCSR*, 49.

[70] Ochs makes this claim explicitly (cf. "Commentary" on ch. 1, in *JCSR*, 68). Cartwright appears to agree. He claims that Yoder's diasporic notion of peoplehood breaks the triad of people, Torah, and land and then says that those wishing to deal with supersessionism after Yoder will need to give more attention to the Talmudic and Rabbinic views of land ("Afterword," in *JCSR*, 220-221).

those same Hebraic images register within a different range of meanings in the book of Exodus, where the promise of land is tied in integral ways to the divine instructions for how to exercise responsibility for the land of *eretz yisrael* (Exodus 19:5)."[71]

In other words, Cartwright is willing to grant "abundant" New Testament evidence advocating a landless diasporic definition of peoplehood, but appears unwilling to allow that evidence to register as a valid first century Jewish view. Yet if Yoder is right in claiming that the earliest Christians were, in fact, messianic Jews, then his advocacy for a landless diasporic definition of peoplehood is not a supersessionist move, but a first century Jewish one. Yoder interprets this New Testament evidence as Jews calling other Jews to be faithful to their own best convictions. Cartwright no doubt sees a line of continuity between Old Testament, Second Temple, and Rabbinic Jewish texts arguing strongly for palestinocentric Jewish identity, but he fails to grant Yoder's basic observation that there is another equally Jewish trajectory spanning the same time. Yoder acknowledges a genuine in-house Jewish debate and he sides with the trajectory that runs through Christ. He refuses to privilege Rabbinic Judaism's interpretation of the Old Testament over the first century Jewish interpretation represented by the New Testament. Rather than Yoder erasing the Jewishness of palestinocentric Judaism, it appears that those charging him with supersessionism have erased the Jewishness of first century messianic Christians.

Finally, a particular aspect of the charge of supersessionism must be evaluated at greater length because it has touched a nerve with multiple readers, even those most

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[71] Cartwright, "Afterword" in *JCSR*, 220.

amenable to Yoder's work in *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*.[72] In "Judaism as a Non-non-Christian Religion," Yoder narrates Jewish history in such a way that Christianity was first born in the womb of Judaism and that Rabbinic Judaism was subsequently born, in part, out of a negative reaction to unfaithful streams within Christianity—streams that sought to sever Christianity from its Jewish roots. One of the implications of this particular narration is that, had Christianity remained faithful to its Jewish roots, the rabbis would never have had to react against it by forming Judaism as we know it. Thus not only did the Jewish-Christian Schism not have to happen, but Rabbinic Judaism itself did not have to exist. It was an aberration of an aberration of the only thing that should have been: messianic Judaism. This results in a paternalistic Christian posture toward Judaism, which not only lacks the virtue of being grounded in Scripture, but tends to start ecumenical dialogue on the wrong foot.

This is not, however, what Yoder is saying. If anything, a contextual reading demonstrates that he is reacting to its mirror image. In particular, Yoder notes Krister Stendahl's remark that whereas Christianity needs Judaism, Judaism has no need for Christianity.[73] Stendahl's logic is that Christianity is like a child who owes her existence to parent Israel whose own existence is in no way dependent upon giving birth to that particular child. This metaphor, Yoder observed, was not true historically. Whereas it is true that various Judaisms existed and indeed gave birth to messianic Judaism, from a purely historical perspective messianic Judaism preceded Rabbinic Judaism proper. Rabbinic Judaism, by virtue of taking concrete form after Pentecost and not in a

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[72] E.g., Boyarin, "Judaism as a Free Church," 13; Cartwright, "Afterword," in *JCSR*, 215; and A. Weaver, *States of Exile*, 38-40.

[73] Yoder, "Judaism as a Non-non-Christian Religion," in *JCSR*, 156.

hermetically-sealed sphere, cannot help but be influenced at least indirectly by the presence of various messianic Judaisms.

Yoder does not, however, assert Christianity's chronological priority in order to gain dialogical leverage over Rabbinic Judaism. It is more likely that Yoder, following the example of the Apostle Paul, is advocating a reciprocal interdependence that denies hegemonic claims to both parties. Paul encounters Stendahl-like logic regarding gender issues in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul addresses believers who had invoked Adam's primogenital rights over Eve as evidence for why women should be subordinate to men in ecclesial gatherings. Paul responds to such jockeying for position by granting Adam's antecedence and then noting that, ever since Eve, all men have been born of women. Paul's goal, in this case, was not to reverse the scale of priority by placing woman over men but to encourage both genders to demonstrate equal regard for one another. The sensitive ecumenical tone in which Yoder speaks throughout these essays lends credence to the possibility that Yoder's intentions were similar.

## Conclusion

The task of this chapter has been to sort through some of the preliminary objections that have cast Yoder's Old Testament narration in a negative light and challenged its viability as a fruitful source of ecclesiological insight. Mistaken readings of his project have been engaged and found wanting. Legitimate objections requiring further testing and careful analysis have been identified. Problematic gaps in Yoder's narration have been exposed. A variety of answers to tough questions regarding theological consistency and methodological integrity have been given. My point is not that Yoder follows the only or even best methodological route, or that the theological

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implications of his project make the best sense of the biblical witness and are entirely congruent with his other theological convictions. My point is that none of the preliminary objections that have been raised against Yoder's narration are cause to abandon or dismiss Yoder's work as a source of ecclesiological insight. They have simply demonstrated that more work needs to be done and that particular theological pitfalls must continue to be avoided.

Though methodology and theology have been separated for the purpose of analysis, it may be demonstrated in retrospect that each of the theological objections to Yoder's narration corresponds to one of the methodological objections. In reading Scripture selectively (e.g., by not giving due weight to passages in tension with his narration), Yoder gives the appearance of supersessionistically erasing key components of what it means for Jews to be God's chosen people. In reading Scripture realistically (e.g., interpreting the YHWH wars as if they really happened), Yoder has inadvertently depicted God in ways that seem to contradict divine self-revelation in Jesus. In reading Scripture canonically and Christocentrically (i.e., interpreting the entire Old Testament in light of its fulfillment in Christ), Yoder has made himself vulnerable to claims that he superimposes his pacifism back upon the Hebrew Scriptures. Finally, in setting up many of his typologies in dichotomous terms (e.g., palestinocentrism vs. diaspora), Yoder seems, in the eyes of some, to foster Marcionite tendencies that pit Old Testament against New Testament categories. In recognizing the unity of theology and methodology we have not yet given full expression to common objections to Yoder's narration. A third element, equally inseparable, entails critical engagement of Yoder's particular readings of Scripture, to which we now turn.

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CHAPTER 6: EVALUATING AND REVISING THE SUBSTANCE OF YODER'S
OLD TESTAMENT NARRATION

**Introduction**

Many of the preliminary objections discussed in chapter 5 fall short because they

fail to engage Yoder on his own terms. Some fault him for not adequately answering

questions he is not trying to answer; others do not read his work carefully enough to

render accurate judgments. The most helpful objections are those that engage Yoder on

his own terms and fault him for not being more consistent within his own agenda. Gaps

in his narration are potentially problematic because Yoder seeks to offer a consistent

reading of Scripture. Selectivity is potentially problematic because Yoder is committed to

hearing every voice and ultimately reconciling each with the truth. Consistency in

depicting God is potentially problematic because Yoder is committed to worshipping the

God who has revealed himself in Scripture. For these reasons, Yoder's narration must be

tested against the wider canonical witness using relevant Bible scholarship as a guide.

This chapter cannot offer a comprehensive evaluation of every facet of Yoder's

Old Testament narration. It cannot survey all the relevant literature in biblical studies and

converse with every rival viewpoint. Its more modest aim is to establish the viability of

Yoder's overall narration, to engage problematic areas that his readers have highlighted,

and to offer critical revisions that strengthen Yoder's narration for the purpose of

ecclesiology. Aspects of his narration or gaps in his telling that are less germane to ecclesiology will be set aside.

The primary question that will guide our evaluation is: Is Yoder's notion of a continuous trajectory of developing peoplehood from the Old Testament to the New based on a strong and viable reading of the text? Answering this question entails demonstrating that Yoder's narration is supported by Old Testament experts who have performed careful textual analysis with the best resources of their guild. Since their guild is far from united, it need not be demonstrated that all Old Testament scholars endorse Yoder's reading. Though rival narrations may be explored profitably for the purpose of ecclesiological reflection, it is beyond the scope of this essay to do so.

The four stages of Yoder's Old Testament narration, as sketched in chapters 3 and 4, provide the framework for engagement and revision in this chapter: Pre-Formation, Formation, Deformation, and Re-Formation. Each of these stages will be recapped, reviewed, and revised as necessary. The recap does not provide a full summary of each stage but accents the salient features of Yoder's narration. The review assesses Yoder's narration by wading into streams of biblical scholarship that corroborate and extend the kind of work Yoder has done and by engaging challenges that call that work into question. Those challenges that Yoder's narration can overcome will be engaged in the review section. Challenges that require substantial revision of Yoder's narration will be noted and then addressed in the revision section. The revision will take the form of fundamental correctives and ancillary concerns. The former address significant weaknesses; the latter offer additional support.

**Pre-Formation**

Recap

Yoder's account of primeval history does not differ significantly from common

narrations, but there are unique emphases. His account stresses the sanctity of life, the

cancerous spread and debilitating effects of bloodshed, and the depraved condition of all

civil, social, and cultural institutions. He also highlights the Fall's negative repercussions

for the nature of leadership insofar as sin, death, and social tension produce structures of

domination and control rather than service and provision. Nonetheless, Yoder's account

is not all bleak because humans are not alone in this world. The Creator graciously meets

them where they are and redirects their sinful missteps and fumbling attempts to

ameliorate the negative consequences thereof. God's redirection and subjugation of fear-

and vengeance-based societal reflexes is one example; his scattering of misguided Babel-

builders is another.

These distinct accents in Yoder's narration invoke fresh readings of familiar texts.

They also constitute a robust primeval description of the deadly and dysfunctional

communal dynamics humans create for themselves. It is within this death-dealing

environment that God begins to forge his own life-giving community.

Review

As important as Yoder's primeval history is to his biblical narration and overall

theological project, it has gone virtually unnoticed.[1] Though scholars have critiqued

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[1] One wonders how wider exposure to Yoder's primeval account would have broadened and deepened recent scholarly attempts at political readings of the Old Testament, which pay scant attention to Genesis 1-11. E.g., Oliver O'Donovan, *Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996), 67 and 70; J. G. McConville, *God and Earthly Power: An Old Testament Political Theology, Genesis-Kings* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 34-36.

Yoder's pejorative view of the state and realistic depiction of the powers, they depend

mostly upon the partial accounts he offers in more popular writings.[2]

An exception to this widespread neglect is Paul Kissling's brief critique of

Yoder's interpretation of Babel. Kissling accuses Yoder of misreading the Babel

narrative in regarding God's corrective intervention as a blessing on humanity rather than

a judgment.[3] Kissling does not spell out why he views this as a misreading. It should be

noted, however, that whereas Yoder seeks to counteract readings that interpret the

confusion of tongues solely as a punishment, he does not view it exclusively as a

blessing. He calls it a "corrective," which implies a disciplinary response to wrongdoing.[4]

This reading is consistent with the pattern we have seen throughout Yoder's handling of

Genesis 1-11. Since the Fall, God has responded to human missteps by redirecting them

and channeling them for his purposes. This parallels Yoder's reading of the Jeremianic

diaspora, which he describes as both chastisement and gracious re-posturing.[5] Since it

was God's good intention, prior to Babel, that people spread out and fill the earth (Gen

1:28; 9:7), perhaps the burden belongs to those who would argue that God was *not*

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[2] E.g., O'Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, 151-52.

[3] Paul J. Kissling, "Can John Howard Yoder's Ethics Embrace the Entire Old Testament as Scripture?" A paper presented at the November 17, 2005, gathering of the Evangelical Theological Society in Valley Forge, PA, no pagination. This misreading, according to Kissling, is rooted in Yoder's alleged reading of the Babel narrative as if it post-dates the dispersion of the nations. Yet Yoder specifies that he does not place the Babel narrative in Genesis 11 after Genesis 10, but compares the relation between chapters 10 and 11 to the relationship between Genesis 1 and 2. The latter reaches back into the former ("See How They Go," in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* [hereafter *JCSR*], eds. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 198, n. 24). Furthermore, Yoder notes specifically that the diversity of languages was the "product" of God's corrective intervention, which implies that the Babel incident took place prior to the scattering of those who gathered in Shinar (*JCSR*, 198, n. 23).

[4] Yoder, "See How They Go," in *JCSR*, 198, n. 24.

[5] Yoder, "See How They Go," in *JCSR*, 190.

graciously blessing Shinar's inhabitants by sparing them the fulfillment of their unity in

rebellion and putting them back on track with his benevolent purposes for them.

A significant gap in Yoder's primeval narration is his failure to discuss the

implications of God destroying the earth with a flood. The flood appears to be a

noteworthy exception to the pattern we see in Yoder's narration of God meeting humans

where they are in sin and graciously redirecting them for their good. The flood is not

gracious redirection; it is destruction. Yoder's biblical realism does not allow for side-

stepping this issue by writing off the flood as a polemical response to pagan accounts of

an event that did not take place in history.[6] Furthermore, Yoder's preferred way of

dealing with God's wrath—narrating it in terms of God granting humans space in their

freedom to choose against God and to live with the eternal separation that choice

entails—also falls short as a satisfactory explanation.[7] In the flood account, God does not

provide space for humans to rebel; he deprives them of such space.

## Fundamental Corrective

The absence of a robust account of the flood could undermine at least part of

Yoder's account because God's action in the flood appears, on the surface, to break up

the consistent trajectory Yoder sees in the primeval history. It is possible, however, to

interpret the flood account in a way that complements Yoder's narration and underscores

the magnitude of God's promise to Abraham. A beginning point is the presupposition

Yoder articulates when engaging the theodicy question, namely: we do not know God

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[6] E.g., Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The World of the Bible in the Light of History* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 37-62, esp. 59.

[7] Yoder, "The Wrath of God and the Love of God," a lecture prepared for the Historic Peace Churches and I. F. O. R. Conference, Beatrice Webb House, England, Sept. 11-14 (Basel: Mennonite Central Committee, 1956), 2; and *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002), 318-320.

reliably until we meet him in the text, and so we must remain open to learning about God from the narrative what we may not expect and did not already know.[8] The beginning and ending points of the flood account are particularly instructive in this regard.

In Genesis 6:5-7, God looks upon the multiplying humans and perceives that "every inclination of their hearts was only evil continually." Human sin has manifested itself with systemic force. Now that humanity has multiplied and filled the earth with violence, the full scope of human depravity is laid bare. God's response is not anger but remorse. He is sorry he created humans and elects to clear them from the earth. His creation has turned on itself and he is stricken with grief.

Though God cannot simply leave humans to their own devices, he will not rob them of freedom to rebel. Instead, he executes the destruction they chose for themselves when they chose to destroy creation. In flooding the earth God is not ending their destruction of creation but expediting it. Yet God does not utterly forsake his creation. He preserves representatives of all species, in their fallenness, to propagate their kind after the flood subsides. Though the surface of the earth is quite literally de-created and then re-created, no attempt is made to reestablish Eden. The new garden will be a vineyard in which Noah gets drunk and his son molests him (Gen 9:20-27).[9] As far as human wickedness is concerned, nothing has changed (Gen 8:21).

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[8] The theocentric perspective by which the flood account is presented here is largely consistent with Walter Brueggemann's approach to the flood. Brueggemann introduces his reading, saying, "We are confronted in this text not with a flood, but with a heavy, painful crisis in the dealings of God with creation. It is popularly thought that the crisis of the flood is to place the world in jeopardy. But a close reading indicates that it is the heart and the person of God which are placed in crisis." Cf. *Genesis*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 78.

[9] The language of "seeing" and "uncovering" someone's nakedness, which is more evident in the Hebrew text, often implies some sort of sexual perversion (cf. esp. Lev 20:17 and 20-21).

At the same time, something *has* changed, something more fundamental than human sin and more determinative for human history. After the flood subsides and God acknowledges the unchanging wickedness of the human heart, God resolves never to destroy the earth again—never to curse the ground on account of the groundskeepers (Gen 8:20-22). Though God's ability to destroy the earth has not changed, his willingness has. God communicates this fresh resolve in the form of a covenant with all creation and he seals that covenant by hanging his "bow" in the clouds. Scholars have long noted the connection between the rainbow and the bow as a weapon, suggesting an image of divine disarmament.[10] In particular, we might consider the hanging of the bow to be the official decommissioning of God's weapon of mass destruction. This is apparently how Isaiah interpreted these events when he refers to God's Noahide promise as a "covenant of peace" (Isa 54:9-10).[11] God has committed himself to finding a more peaceful way to deal with human wickedness and the deep pain it causes him.

That God would use such a weapon at all serves to dispel the notion of a purely wrathless God. With a canonical-directional approach, however, this text may be seen as pointing toward a gracious peace-waging God. It points to a God who possesses globally destructive power but resolves in love never to use it again. It points to a God who limits himself by covenanting with inferior parties despite their wicked hearts. It points to a God who places the burden on himself to redirect an errant creation some other way. It points to a God who chooses to suffer the grief of offering his love to creatures whose

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[10] Kissling, "The Rainbow in Genesis 9:12-17: A Triple Entendre?" *Stone-Campbell Journal* 4 (Spr 2001): 235-248. Kissling credits Wellhausen with being the first to suggest the bow as a weapon (255). George Mendenhall popularized the undrawn bow image in *The Tenth Generation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1973), 44-45.

[11] It is also possible that the phrase "covenant of peace" in Isaiah 54:9-10 refers to God's promise not to destroy his people Israel. If so, Isaiah is comparing God's specific Israelite covenant of peace to God's words to Noah, which presumes the Noahide covenant has the same meaning.

thoughts are always evil. A God like this is not incompatible with a Messiah like Jesus. A longsuffering God like this would choose to enter the fray himself in order to absorb the wickedness of his people, even to the point of letting them hang him on a tree.

From this perspective, the flood, YHWH wars, and Jeremianic turn may be seen as standing within a common trajectory that culminates in Christ. When conditions on earth become so wicked that a fresh start is absolutely required, the grief-stricken Creator finds a way to spare a remnant and perpetuate a fallen race. Upon beginning anew with unworthy survivors, God vows never to let this happen again. Somehow he will work with human fallenness and, without depriving humanity of what it has always meant to be human, God will formulate a fitting response. He will wage peace against violence against all odds.

As the postdiluvian race begins to fill out and spread throughout the earth, God carves out a people for himself—a people who will become his instruments of worldwide peace. During the early phases of this people's formation, a certain degree of violence will be required, albeit on a smaller scale, to preserve them, create space for them, and protect them against internal and external threats. God must creatively solve the problem of forging a people of peace in a world of war. The YHWH wars are part of his solution. God delivers and sustains the Israelites with his own sword so that they will not grow too accustomed to swords of their own. Such protection will only be required for a time, though. God will eventually scatter his people throughout the world so they may take his peace to the nations. The sword will then become superfluous for them since their identity will be rooted in faith, mission, and Spirit—not geography, biology, or personal prosperity. This will be a significant shift for them. It will grate against their sense of

self-preservation. God will therefore have to show them firsthand the way of peace. He will send his Messiah to teach them the disarmed life and to demonstrate its superior power. He will show them how to struggle against the sword without being seduced by it. He will conquer sin and death—not with a superior show of force, but with the superior force of love.

This is one way of tracing a coherent canonical trajectory that takes the flood seriously. Rather than abstracting depictions of God from different parts of the Bible and highlighting apparent contradictions between them, it embraces a larger narrative arc and asks how the flood, too, may be deemed among those Scriptures of which Christ claimed to be the fulfillment (Luke 24:44-47). Seen in light of this canonical-directional movement, the flood marks a critical beginning point of a coherent trajectory. The God of Israel emerges from the waters of this flood with a firm resolve that frames the remaining drama of Scripture from Abraham to Jesus.

## Ancillary Concerns

### Intimate Communion with God

Yoder's account may also be strengthened by more directly challenging the common assumption that humans enjoyed intimate personal communion with God prior to the Fall—an assumption that can lead to narrating salvation history in terms of the quest to regain lost communion.[12] Yoder's narration partly corrects this assumption by focusing on the social and creational aspects of both garden life and sin's consequences.

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[12] E.g., Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 82-83, 90-91; and Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 208.

For the purposes of ecclesiology, however, more must be said. We can better appreciate the role of God's people in salvation history if we disabuse ourselves of the notion that salvation is primarily a matter of restoring the personal relationship individuals originally had with God. A careful reading of Genesis 3 furnishes a needed corrective.

The textual evidence for personal communion with God in Eden is minimal. It is found only in Genesis 3:8: "They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden." This passage allegedly legitimates the personal communion motif for five reasons: (1) it takes place in the cool of the day when humans like to walk, (2) Adam and Eve recognize the sound of the LORD, (3) God speaks in a conversational manner, (4) God's presence in the tabernacle is described using similar language, and (5) God forms the first man and woman in a personal way.[13]

The counter-evidence is stronger. God never walks *with* humans in Genesis 3; he walks alone and they hide (3:8). The purpose of God's visit is disciplinary, not recreational. The sound Adam and Eve heard may have been God's thundering presence. The phrase translated "time of the evening breeze" may more literally be translated as "wind/spirit of the day/storm." Some scholars have noted that this language suggests a

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[13] Christopher L. K. Grundke, "A Tempest in a Teapot? Genesis III 8 Again," *Vetus Testamentum* 51, no. 4 (2001): 550. Regarding the connection to God's presence in the tabernacle, the reflexive form of *halak* (walk) is used in Lev 26:12 and 2 Sam 7:6. For additional parallels, cf. Gregory Beale, "The Final Vision of the Apocalypse and Its Implications for a Biblical Theology of the Temple," in *Heaven on Earth: The Temple in Biblical Theology*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and Simon Gathercole (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2004), 197-200.

divine judgment theophany.[14] The word for "walk" is in the reflexive form which, when referring to an extended time period, means something like "to go in and out" among a people or place;[15] and when referring to a particular time, like in Genesis 3:8, it indicates an intense movement "to and fro."[16] It is thus quite possible that, in Genesis 3:8, God is pacing or walking intensely out of concern. The sole text supporting intimate prelapsarian communion with God may thus have an altogether different meaning.

Beyond Genesis 3:8, there is no evidence that the first couple walked with God regularly, conversed with him casually, or communed with him socially.[17] Also, analysis of the consequences of sin offers no hint that spatial separation between God and humans resulted (Gen 3:14-19). The consequences focus on death and the corrupted relationships between humans and throughout the created order. This is reinforced in that when the humans are banished from the garden, there is no statement to the effect that communion with God is somehow compromised. The text only indicates that they were denied access "to the tree of life" (Gen 3:24).

That the Fall did not engender physical separation between humans and God is confirmed by the remainder of the Pentateuch. God still makes appearances to humans when he sees fit and he converses with them as he did in the garden. Sometimes God

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[14] Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 97-106; and Jeffrey Niehaus, "In the Wind of the Storm: Another Look at Genesis III 8," *Vetus Testamentum* 44, no. 2 (1994): 263-267.

[15] In this sense, God walks in Israel's camp to deliver the Israelites from their enemies (Deut 23:14), kings walk before their people to lead them (1 Sam 12:2), God dwells among the Israelites in the tabernacle (2 Sam 7:6), and the wicked walk in their iniquity (Ps 68:22).

[16] E.g., Anxious Mordecai walks back and forth before the court to check on Esther (Esth 2:11), arrows of lightning flash back and forth in a fierce storm (Ps 77:17-18), and a torch passes back and forth between living beings in Ezekiel's terrifying vision (Ezek 1:13).

[17] Adam was alone in the garden before Eve was created precisely because God neither lived there nor served as Adam's personal companion (Gen 2:18).

appears in a nonthreatening way (Gen 18), and other times with menacing thunder (Exod

19). When prophets anticipate a day of restored divine presence, their point of reference

is not Eden but the tabernacle with its multiple layers of protective separation (Ezek

37:27).[18] Eden is hardly on their radar and, when it is, there is no evidence that God

communes with humans there.[19] This is not to suggest that humanity's relationship with

God is the same after sin. Our status before God has changed: we now live in a state of

rebellion against him as evident in our persistent disharmony with his created order. But

there is no textual evidence in the primeval history that the kind of companionship

humans were designed to have with God and originally enjoyed in Eden was one of

constant intimate spatial proximity.

The main implication of this insight is negative, but no less important. If the

primary meaning of the Fall is the loss of personal communion with God, then the

function of God's people may be reduced to helping individuals connect with their

Creator so they may be together with him in the eschaton. If such proximity is not what

was lost, however, we are drawn back to the text to discern what else may be happening

there. We may then observe, alongside Yoder, that more central to the text's own

concerns is the friction that sin has engendered between not only humans and God, but

also between humans and each other, humans and nonhuman creation. Additionally, we

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[18] It is easy to assume that humans could dwell in God's presence without ill effects because they were sinless. However, the visions of Israel's prophets may indicate otherwise. The presumably sinless beings that were created to worship God and surround his throne also had built-in layers of separation to protect them from God's awesome presence (Isa 6:2; Ezek 1:11).

[19] Cf. Isa 51:3; Ezek 28:13-19; 31:9-18; 36:5; and Joel 2:3. It is equally telling that the Garden of Eden is not mentioned in the New Testament. Though God's presence descends amidst the New Jerusalem envisioned in Revelation 21, it is a presence that lights up the world, guides nations, and dispels all sinful practices. We are never told that people mingle with God, and Eden is never consulted as a parallel. Furthermore, when Adam is remembered in the New Testament, he is never identified as the one who walked with God in a special way (though Enoch and Noah are identified as such *after the Fall*, cf. Gen 5:22-24; and 6:9). Rather, Adam is associated with death (Rom 5:17 and 1 Cor 15:22).

see fragmentation of the human person as well as the created order. These consequences are analyzed in greater detail in the final chapter, but for now it is important to note that the problems caused by sin, for which God called a special people into existence, entail a holistic constellation of relational and creational issues. God has not called into existence a people in order to prepare select humans for a future heavenly reunion but to bear witness to the shalomic harmony that God intends for his creation. As God's people do this, they demonstrate to the world the holistic salvation God is preparing and that he offers through Christ, through his people, which is the meaning of true communion.

*Primeval Egalitarianism*

One of the most important insights of Yoder's primeval narration is his observation that the fall into patriarchy impacted both the relationship between husbands and wives and the typical shape human leadership would take in this world. When humans exercise domineering leadership, they showcase the Fall's effects and cut against the grain of the universe. Yoder's thesis gains support from the example of Jesus who embodied a different kind of leadership—a servant leadership that seeks the interests of those in one's care and not of oneself. Yoder may be right that women tend to be more gifted in this form of leadership and that they often exemplify this in how they lead in the home, but he risks compromising his own view in suggesting that women were the primordial decision-makers. Genesis 1-3 is far from clear about this.[20]

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[20] It is not clear, for instance, that Eve's being created to crown creation and complete what Adam was lacking means that she was the leader. Nor is it clear that the serpent tempted Eve because she was the decision-maker. Yoder did not likely think the evidence was clear. He probably highlighted alternative readings to expose the fact that more common assumptions are equally ambiguous (e.g., that the serpent tempted Eve because she was more susceptible).

It would be better to emphasize that humans were initially granted equal status and dominion (Gen 1:26-31) and that, in taking the lead in sin, Eve inadvertently contributed to the very conditions that gave men a physical advantage and thus an upper-hand in the administration of ancient societies. We should not assume that the stronger physique that gives men a competitive edge over women in hunting, fighting, strenuous labor, and various forms of lording-over leadership would have given them any advantage in the peaceful prelapsarian garden where such practices had no place. It is because of sin that the world will resort to domineering male leadership to deal with the threat and insecurity posed by violence and the presumption of scarce resources. It is because of sin that women will desire that power but will often fall short due to physical disadvantage. Yet women will not be the only ones to suffer. All who lack competitive advantage will be subordinated by coercive domineering power: the weak, the disabled, the young, the old, the poor, the minority, and those with less technological prowess. An analysis that begins with egalitarianism as opposed to matriarchy therefore avoids the difficult detour of trying to base womanly rule on scant textual evidence. It also focuses the conversation more directly upon the nature of leadership in a fallen world and the difference Christ has made, not simply for women or for those less powerful, but also for the nature of leadership itself.

Additionally, such a revision establishes a canonical trajectory by which to assess later leadership structures among God's people. In the Torah-formed life God establishes for Israel, one can discern an equalizing tendency that reduces the negative consequences

of power-hungry leadership like the nations.[21] Israel's social and political life thus stands

as a significant witness, under fallen conditions, against the domineering leadership of

empire. When Israel's kings betray these principles, they bring prophetic censure upon

themselves and eventually lose the privilege of leading God's people as monarchs. As

this trajectory continues through Christ and into the New Testament, no attempt is made

to reverse gender inequalities by placing women in charge. Rather, leadership itself is

transformed from the inside out so that servant leadership is made normative and no one

is allowed to dominate.[22] If at the end of the day matriarchy amounts to egalitarianism in

Yoder's account, then his narration would be strengthened by beginning with it. The path

toward a kingdom in which there is neither male nor female will extol neither patriarchy

nor matriarchy but will exhort us to mutual submission and other-directed service.

**Formation**

Recap

The formation of God's people covers extensive ground in Yoder's narration,

spanning from Abraham to Saul. Yoder's account of these events is not particularly

innovative though the meaning he gives them has a distinct accent. When Abraham

leaves Babylon and the Israelites leave Egypt, they are not simply moving to new places;

they are moving away from corrupt empires whose totalizing vision of life stands in

fundamental conflict with the totalizing vision God has for his people. The fundamental

attribute God requires of both Abraham and the Israelites is trust in him alone.

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[21] Cf. Ronald W. Pierce, "From Old Testament Law to New Testament Gospel," in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*, eds. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca M. Groothius (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 96-109.

[22] E.g., Mark 9:35; Luke 22:25-27; John 13:1-17; and 1 Pet 5:3, 5.

The way of life to which God was calling his people and that they already began experiencing on their journeys was graciously set forth in Torah. The governing dynamic of Torah is YHWH's exclusive reign over the people. Two corollaries followed: trust in YHWH alone for safety and deliverance (not military might or strategic alliances) and flexible decentralized leadership (not a human king who subsumes all offices under his own structured hierarchy). This Torah-formed way of life is part of a consistent trajectory that is present throughout the entire biblical narrative and eventually culminates in Christ. The YHWH wars are a vital part of this trajectory in the early stages of Israel's formation to the extent that they demonstrate God's power to deliver those who trust in him. Had the Israelites remained faithful to YHWH's kingship, such wars could have secured their safety in the Promised Land without their having to capitulate to imperial visions of order and security.

<div align="center">Review</div>

Before engaging the shortcomings of Yoder's narration, it is worth highlighting two key facets of that narration which have received corroboration from Old Testament scholars. One is the meaning of YHWH war in Scripture. Ben Ollenburger has written a helpful essay tracing the scholarly engagement of YHWH war from Gerhard von Rad's pioneering work through Millard Lind's equally valuable contribution.[23] Von Rad and Lind both agree that the YHWH war tradition belonged to pre-monarchical Israel and that

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[23] Gerhard von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel*, ed. and trans. Marva J. Dawn (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1991); Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980); and Ben Ollenburger, "Introduction to Gerhard von Rad's Theory of Holy War," in *Holy War in Ancient Israel*, 1-33.

it constituted a robust theo-political stance over and against monarchy.[24] Not all scholars

agree with von Rad's reconstruction, but what matters from a canonical-directional

perspective is that Yoder's interpretation of the pivotal role YHWH war played in Israel's

history is supported by a noteworthy stream of Old Testament scholarship.[25]

A second facet of Yoder's narration that scholarship supports is his claim that

Israel's more egalitarian pre-monarchical tribal system was a constitutive feature of

Israel's identity as a people. It was an intentional anti-monarchical stance over against

both large imperial powers like Egypt and smaller monarchical city-states throughout

Canaan. This facet finds support in sociological investigations into ancient Israelite life,

exegetical studies of the relevant passages, and theological treatments applying its

relevance to ecclesiology.[26] Scholars agree that this particular sociological posture was

not incidental. Lohfink expresses their common sentiments well, saying, "That all around

Israel there were reigning monarchs while Israel itself for two hundred years had no king

must be taken seriously in theological terms."[27] In making this same observation, Yoder

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[24] Lind and von Rad disagree, however, insofar as Lind traces this motif back to the earliest traditions of Israel's origins (Exod 15) and von Rad places it after the Solomonic Enlightenment as a theological rewrite that only partially conveys the pre-monarchical ethos (Ollenburger, "Introduction," in *Holy War in Ancient Israel*, 32-33).

[25] Lind's work is particularly important for Yoder because it more closely approximates Yoder's position and because Lind's careful exegetical approach gives further credence to the more general claims Yoder often makes. Yoder's endorsement of Lind's project is evident in the introduction he wrote to Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior*, 17-19.

[26] Rainer Albertz, *From the Beginning to the End of the Monarchy*, vol. 1 of *History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 23-103, esp. 72-79; Walter Brueggemann, "Rethinking Church Models through Scripture," *Theology Today* 48, no. 2 (1991): 131-133; Norman K. Gottwald, "Early Israel as an Anti-Imperial Community," in *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 17-20; *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.E.* (Mary Knoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 489-492; and Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church? Toward a Theology of the People of God* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 107-109.

[27] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* 107.

was not being novel; he was standing in a stream well-populated by Old Testament scholars.

Though these two pillars of Yoder's account of Israel's formation have solid support, there are at least three underdeveloped areas that need to be addressed:

(1) Yoder does not account for the critical and necessary role that land plays in Israel's formation and early identity. He is quite clear that residency in Palestine is no longer required after Jeremiah, but he never accounts for why such residency was important to begin with. Filling this gap is essential because the Promised Land was a key component of Israelite identity.[28]

(2) Yoder wrote little concerning how Torah serves to shape Israelite identity both in the land and beyond it.[29] It is not that Yoder did not have a high view of Torah, in chapter 4 we noted his charitable account of Torah; he simply never gives extended treatment of Torah for its own sake. Like the scant attention Yoder paid to the Promised Land, this lacuna stands out as a deficiency in his narrative (though not necessarily in his thought).

(3) Scholars have also faulted Yoder for disparaging Israel's priesthood. Cartwright, in particular, accuses Yoder of flattening out the significance of Moses "by

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[28] The plot of Torah revolves around God's commitment to settling Abraham and his descendants into Canaan. See David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1997). Significant works on the role of land include Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002); W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1974); Norman C. Habel, *The Land is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 1985); and Ben C. Ollenburger, *Zion, the City of the Great King: A Theological Symbol of the Jerusalem Cult* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987).

[29] Gerald W. Schlabach argues that Yoder expends much effort critiquing how *not* to live in the land (e.g., Constantinianism) and little effort showing how properly to live in the land (e.g., Deuteronomy); cf. "Deuteronomic or Constantinian: What Is the Most Basic Problem for Christian Social Ethics?" in *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 449-461.

dislocating all 'priestly endeavors' as evidence for the 'Davidic project.'"[30] Since

Cartwright offers no primary texts to substantiate this claim and because Yoder does not

talk about the priesthood in *JCSR*, it is difficult to assess it.[31] It is unlikely that Yoder's

reason for failing to discuss priests is that he deemed them puppets of the king.[32] More

often than not, when Yoder discusses priests it is to call attention to the alternative they

originally posed to absolute monarchical rule. He lumps them together with prophets,

judges, and elders as those who share leadership responsibility within Israel as an

egalitarian counter-witness to monarchical hierarchies that subsume all power under a

single human personage.[33] Yoder's most extended and constructive assessment of

priesthood takes place in the context of his treatment of atonement in *Preface to*

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[30] Cartwright, "Afterword: 'If Abraham Is Our Father…' The Problem of Christian Supersessionism *after* Yoder," in *JCSR*, 223.

[31] The work in which Yoder is most negative about the priesthood is *Fullness of Christ: Paul's Vision of Universal Ministry* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1987), 1-8, 16-20. In this work, Yoder uses the Israelite priesthood as an example of how the somewhat universal sociological functionary he calls "professional religionist" was partly incorporated into Israel's life through the priesthood but later worked back out of Israel's life beginning with the dispersion and culminating in the grace-gifted Church. One could deduce from this work that Yoder had a one-sidedly negative view of the priesthood. Yet three factors militate against this: (1) Yoder says positive things about the priesthood elsewhere (e.g., *Preface to Theology*, 282-283); (2) Yoder's foils in *Fullness of Christ* are those who pull Old Testament passages out of context in order to justify current ecclesial practices for which there is no New Testament warrant; and (3) Yoder does not describe the *essence* of Old Testament priesthood in this book but what it has in common with professional religionists. This highly polemical and quite early work by Yoder (the original draft goes back to 1969) should thus not be used as the primary context for interpreting Yoder's much later work in *JCSR*.

[32] If Yoder had, in fact, disparaged monarchical priesthood on account of its being co-opted by the throne, it would not have been for lack of textual evidence. Consider Israel's earliest kings. Saul offers illicit sacrifices (1 Sam 13). David pretends to be an official on royal business, frightens a priest, and takes consecrated food for himself (1 Sam 21:1-6). Solomon deposes and appoints priests without consulting God (1 Kgs 2:35). Jeroboam sets up his own high altars and appoints non-Levites to serve as his priests (1 Kgs 12:31).

[33] Cf. Yoder, "*Preface to Theology*, 242-43; "Why Ecclesiology Is Social Ethics," in *Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 117; and "Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics," in *Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 138-39.

*Theology*.[34] In this work he extols priestly work toward forgiveness and reconciliation, priestly leadership in praise and intercession, priestly representation of other humans, and priestly mediation on behalf of others. Yoder also notes that Christ fulfills this office and includes his followers in his priestly ministry by making them a priestly people with priestly responsibilities.[35] This is not something new that Christ initiated; it was true of Israel as well (Exod 19:6; Isa 61:6). Yoder certainly had a more expansive view of the priesthood than he sets forth in *JCSR*. His slim treatment in that work may stem from the fact that priests were not part of the case he was trying to make. Nonetheless, more extensive engagement of the priesthood would strengthen Yoder's narration.

<div align="center">Fundamental Corrective</div>

If Abraham's promise to be a blessing to all nations is the foundation of Israel's identity, and if Christ has called his followers to fulfill that promise by scattering his people across the earth to be a blessing to all nations, and if the Jeremianic turn is the beginning of God's process of scattering his people—then God's promise to give Abraham's descendants the land of Canaan must somehow be placed in line with that trajectory. Yoder fails to do this and has left it to others to fill the void. Toward that end, I argue that Scripture narrates a trans-testamental movement that begins with landless Abraham and Sarah and ultimately leads to a people group with a distinct identity scattered throughout the world. This narration entails at least three critical phases for God's people that correspond to three geographical domains:

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[34] Yoder, *Preface to Theology*, 282-284.

[35] Yoder, *Preface to Theology*, 236-237.

1. They must become a numerous people with a distinct identity [this happens in Egypt]
2. They must become a numerous people with a distinct identity that reflects God's intentions for all creation [this was designed to happen in Palestine]
3. They must become a numerous people with a distinct identity that reflects God's intentions for all creation and are scattered throughout the world and therefore positioned to bless the world [this happens throughout all the earth, including Palestine]

The first phase begins with the age of the Patriarchs when Israel was birthed as a small wandering tribe. In order to enlarge their numbers, when the Israelites lacked a large enough plot of land within which to do so, God relocated them to Egypt where they could multiply rapidly and retain their unique identity (since Egyptians refused to mix with Jews; cf. Gen 43:32). Their stay in Egypt also allowed time for Canaan's inhabitants to reach a critical point of iniquity requiring judgment (Gen 15:13-16). After four hundred years, the Israelites were large in number but their identity did not reflect God's intentions for creation. Their identity would need to be forged according to Torah and such forging could not take place in the crucible of Egyptian slavery.

The next phase entailed God bringing the Israelites into a place where they could remain separate *and* shape their identity according to God's intentions for all creation. His chosen place is Palestine and his shaping mechanism is Torah. Torah is central to God's purposes because it is the means by which God shapes his people into a community of witness (Deut 4:5-8). Since the Torah-formed life is central to Israel's witness, it is highly instructive to note the shaping influence of Torah on Israel's life, which we return to in the final chapter.[36]

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[36] Gordon McConville showcases the shaping influence of Torah in his analysis of Deuteronomy, which he regards as the witnessing charter or constitution for Israelite nationhood. In addition to addressing central issues such as land and justice, he corroborates and deepens Yoder's description of the political dynamics of early Israel by noting the importance of shared leadership, the decision-making power of the gathered assembly, and the limited role of a king. Cf. *God and Earthly Power*, 74-98. Cf. also McConville,

This leads to phase three: the scattering of God's distinct people whose life has been ordered according to Torah. As far as Abraham and Moses expected, Israel's future would end in Palestine where its identity coalesced. They knew that God would somehow bless all nations through Israel, but God never revealed to them the precise means by which he would do so. With their limited perception of the world's size, it may have been natural for them to assume that all nations would stream to Israel to be blessed and that permanent residency in Palestine would be required. From a post-Pentecost perspective, however, we see that Palestine was not the end goal. God intended to scatter his people throughout the world in the form of charismatic communities that live out their distinct God-given identity as witnesses.

According to this three-phrase narration, Israel's land was indeed central to Israel's identity. It was not central, however, as an end in itself, a prize to be won, or even a permanent gift to be eternally possessed. This narration raises three questions that need to be answered.

(1) Why does Torah focus on Israel's relationship to the land if the majority of God's people would eventually be called to leave it? Israel's identity is tied closely to the land because part of Israel's holistic witness to the world entailed exemplifying what it means to live in harmony with the land. Being an organic part of God's good creation means forming shalomic relationships with all of one's environs, including soil, water, sky, and animals. In learning to love its land, Israel was positioning itself to show others how to do the same. God's intentions for creation do not entail Gnostic detachment but intimate harmony with God's good creation. Yet learning to love one's land requires

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"Law and Monarchy in the Old Testament," in *A Royal Priesthood: The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically: A Dialogue with Oliver O'Donovan* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 76-77.

learning to love it as God's land, which exists to serve his purposes. God will sometimes call his people to leave their land and to make their home in the land of others for others' sake. In such cases, God's people must lose their life—even their land—to find it (Matt 10:39). This seems tragic if one deems absolute land ownership a positive norm, but the direction of the canonical narrative, beginning with the Jeremianic commission and culminating in the Great Commission, militates against this notion.

This is part of what it means for Israel to be a nation of priests. The Levites received no tribal allotment because they existed to mediate between the people and God. They learned to exist in the land and to cooperate with it like everyone else, but they had to live in the territory of others with the Lord alone as their portion (Deut 18:1-2). This relative freedom from territorial responsibility empowered them to do what others could not. It freed them to focus on matters of worship, to become experts in Torah, to hold everyone equally accountable to Torah since they occupied a critical distance from territorial politics,[37] and to honor the sanctity of life by both overseeing the proper letting of blood (sacrificial system) and looking after the lives of those who were guilty of unintentional bloodshed (cities of refuge).[38] In light of Yoder's Old Testament narration, it is significant to note that, after the loss of land suffered in 586, Israel's poets appropriated priestly language, saying, "The LORD is my portion."[39] Landless Israelites thus began processing their new state of existence in landless priestly terms. If priests could manage, so could they. This priestly trajectory culminates in Christ, who fulfills the

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[37] The priests appear to have a role in keeping kings accountable as well; cf. Deut 17:18.

[38] Cf. Josh 21 and 1 Chron 6:57-67. Even though the Levites had no responsibility for presiding over the cases of accused slayers, their freedom from ordinary tribal commitments positioned them to be hospitable to convicts who would be rejected by most of society.

[39] Cf. Lam 3:24 and Ps 73:26. I am indebted to Oliver O'Donovan for this insight. Cf. *Desire of the Nations*, 44-45.

sacrificial components of the priesthood and who confers upon his followers the royal priesthood that Israel was set apart to be (1 Pet 2:5, 9 and Exod 19:6). The transtestamental priestly role of God's people informs the ecclesial framework set forth in the final chapter.

(2) Why did God give his people the impression both in Torah and in prophecy that Jerusalem would remain central? Though reading the divine mind is not an option, we can make a few observations. To begin with, Israel's hopes for the future and God's ability to speak to his people in ways they can understand are necessarily restricted by Israel's past experiences. As Brueggemann notes, "The land is really lost, and history is really ended. There is no king, no temple, no royal city, no Israel. It is ended. But at the same time those who dared to speak of a new history now beginning could do so only in terms of the old history, for they had no other images or models. But the use of such images inevitably suggested that the old history really continues in some way, when surely it does not."[40] This is not to say there is no connection between Israel's hope for restoration and its fulfillment, but it does caution us against simplistically interpreting prophetic language.

It must also be noted that Israel's God often holds back details about his intentions, especially about how his eschatological plans will come to fruition. Scripture does not state that the Messianic kingdom will come in two installments, but it does. Scripture does not anticipate that the Gentiles will be incorporated into God's people to form a "new humanity" that is neither Jew nor Gentile, but they are. Scripture does not foretell a Messiah who is both human and divine, but he is. In all of these ways, the prophecies of Israel's Scripture are smaller in scope than their fulfillment. The

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[40] Brueggemann, *The Land*, 124.

enlargement of God's fulfillment should not, however, be interpreted as a negation or falsification of those earlier promises. It is especially instructive to note that Paul considered God's incorporation of Gentiles into God's people as a mystery. It was a mystery because the Jews expected the Gentiles to stream to Jerusalem for instruction and then go home to their Gentile lands. God's fulfillment was larger. His people would become one people with the Gentiles and their unity would be a witness throughout the world. This transterritorial, multiethnic unity was not expected by the prophets and thus not reflected in their prophecy. It is not that their expectations were too territorial; they were simply too small.

Furthermore, even though God did not reveal the fullness of his soteriological mystery to the Israelites, the way he formed them as a people lent itself quite well to its future transterritorial role. From a biblical perspective, God makes it clear to the Israelites that, although he has given the Promised Land to them as a gift (Lev 20:24), the land is his and not theirs. The precise nature of their relation to the land is stated in Leviticus 25:23: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants."[41] Though God had taken his land away from the Canaanites and given it to the Israelites, the Israelites do not hold exclusive rights to it. God has given it to them so he may order their lives according to Torah. Were they not to order their lives in this way, God would have no reason to give the land to them. This is why God tells the

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[41] For a concise summary of the implications of this law within the context of Jubilee legislation, see Ben Ollenburger, "Jubilee: 'The land is mine; you are aliens and tenants with me,'" in *Reclaiming the Old Testament: Essays in Honour of Waldemar Janzen*, ed. Gordon Zerbe (Winnipeg, Manitoba: CMBC Publications, 2001), 208-234.

Israelites on multiple occasions that if they do not keep Torah, the land will vomit them out just as it did the Canaanites.[42]

More speculatively, one wonders why God places the Israelites in a territory that has always been unstable by virtue of its size, topography, and natural resources and is located at that crossroads of thriving imperial centers. Could it be that Israel was never supposed to become too comfortable? It is also noteworthy that God does not structure the Israelites' life together with a strong centralized government that is poised for the long haul. There is no capital city, no permanent temple, no constructive foreign policy, and no specific instruction how to carry out their mission to bless the nations. They must order their lives according to Torah, follow God's lead in his mobile shrine, and trust that God will know what to do next. Perhaps most speculatively, Israel's formation into twelve tribes would have lent itself quite well to their being scattered in multiple directions as the twelve apostles eventually were. We cannot know, of course, but one wonders what would have happened had the Israelites not chosen kingship over Torah and God did not have to work through their self-imposed detours.

(3) Why did Jesus center his ministry in Palestine and not some other diasporic location if God had already decided to move on from there? Jesus himself answers this question in his post-resurrection appearances in Luke-Acts: "Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, *beginning from Jerusalem*. You are witnesses of these things'" (Luke 24:45-48). Jesus then tells his followers to wait in

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[42] Cf. Lev 18:26-28 and 20:22. Joshua learns this lesson when he meets the LORD's commander (Josh 5:13-15). Israel's occupation in the land is only secure to the extent that they remain on the LORD's side.

Jerusalem for Spirit-empowerment after which they will be his witnesses from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:4-8).

The implications of this passage are far-reaching. Though Jerusalem played a relatively minimal role in Jesus' ministry, he considered it essential from a scriptural fulfillment standpoint that the missionary work of the Church would begin in Jerusalem. There is no single Old Testament passage, however, which indicates that the messianic movement must go out from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Most Old Testament prophecies depict Jerusalem as a light that *attracts the nations to it* (e.g., Jer 3:17 and Zech 8:22) and suggest that once the nations are drawn to Zion, they will take God's Word back to their homelands (Isa 2:1-3). This is not, however, the only prophetic vision. Isaiah 49:6 anticipates the Lord's servant *going out to be* a light to the nations. This is likely what Jesus had in mind, in Luke-Acts, since Paul and Barnabas quote this passage in Acts 13:47 to describe the commission they received from him. Significantly, however, Isaiah 49:6 does not mention Jerusalem.[43] Jesus thus appears to be combining the servant's mission from Isaiah with multiple passages elsewhere about Jerusalem's restoration and the nations streaming to it. The implication of this combination is that God's promises about Jerusalem's global significance are fulfilled not by a mass international incursion into Palestine, but by the Gospel message beginning in Jerusalem and going out from there. Though Jesus neglects Jerusalem throughout his ministry, it

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[43] The next prophetic oracle, Isaiah 49:8-26, refers to Zion's restoration. But the topic of this oracle is not the Jewish mission to the nations but God's use of the nations to restore Israel. The forthcoming revision of the refortification projects of Ezra and Nehemiah demonstrates that the latter should not be interpreted in such a way as to englobe the former. God is accomplishing two separate but related tasks. He uses Persia to restore the fortune of some Jews in Jerusalem and he repositions Israel to go out to the nations in order to be a light to them.

must become the launching point for the Church's mission so that Scripture may be fulfilled and God may keep his promise to Abraham and his descendants.

This understanding of Jerusalem has significant implications for how one interprets the returns of Ezra and Nehemiah. Furthermore, it stands in full continuity with the Jeremianic turn. God's providential scattering of his people in preparation for their global mission need not conflict with his choice to maintain a diminished presence in Jerusalem, which will pave the way for the Messiah who will gather his people and, essentially, pick up where Jeremiah left off. It is thus evident that, whereas Yoder paid scant attention to land, Torah, and priesthood, these neglected motifs may be explored in ways that do not undermine but strengthen his overall narration.

## Ancillary Concern

The story of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 25-33 is familiar, but its ecclesial implications are often overlooked. Two sons are born, Esau is older than Jacob. Because God rejects human standards of preferential treatment, including the Ancient Near Eastern preference for first sons, he tended to use number two sons to advance his promise to the Patriarchs.[44] This choice is less about favoritism for number two sons than it is about ambivalence toward the supreme value humans routinely gave number one sons.[45] God therefore chooses Jacob over Esau to receive his blessing. Jacob does not

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[44] E.g., Isaac was second to Ishmael and Abraham was likely second to Haran. Though it is not stated explicitly in the text, Paul Kissling has argued persuasively that Abraham was a number two son by calculating the age of Terah when he had sons, the location where Haran died, the age of Terah when he died, the date when Abraham left Haran, and the fact that Nahor married Haran's daughter. Cf. *Genesis*, vol. 2, The College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2009), 62-64.

[45] This rejection of primogeniture may have entailed a subtle critique of ancient leadership structures, including kingship. It is noteworthy that David is the youngest of eight sons and that he descends from the line of Judah, the fourth-born son. The fact that neither Judah nor David is the second-born son underscores that God is less concerned with "number two" than he is with "*not* number one."

realize why he was chosen. Rather than wait on God's timing to receive the blessing as a gift, Jacob postures himself for the blessing by swindling his way into number one status. When Jacob dupes his brother out of birthright and blessing, Esau is furious. Jacob must flee the Promised Land to live in the land that his forefathers left behind. In this self-imposed exile, Jacob is humbled and swindled but not forgotten. When his time of servitude is over, he makes his way home only to encounter his brother Esau. Through a remarkable series of events, Jacob bows before his older brother, hands over massive amounts of wealth, and submits himself and his family to be Esau's servants. In short, the reversal is reversed. The number two son is back to being number two and, at last, God can resume his plans for Jacob.

The parallels between Jacob the man and Israel the nation are instructive. Israel was chosen by God precisely because it was small and insignificant. Israel, however, wanted to be impressive like the nations around it and swindled its way into kingship. God was not pleased. He eventually sent Israel into exile to be humbled and divested of the status that it never should have assumed. Now that Israel is number two, in terms of being unimpressive politically and insignificant in the nations' eyes, God can resume his purposes for his people. Jacob's story thus stands in Scripture both to warn against judging by human standards and to critique Israel's efforts to become like the nations.

**Deformation**

Recap

Israel's monarchy is the centerpiece of Yoder's narration and the purported source of Israel's deformation. In choosing a king like the nations, the Israelites rejected YHWH's kingship along with its unique way of ordering their lives (Torah) and

protecting them (YHWH wars). Monarchy like the nations was not one of many beneficial ways by which Israel may have ordered its Israel's life under YHWH. It was the antithesis of God's intention to order Israel's life as a witness over against the nations' ways of ordering their lives. Yoder draws support for this negative assessment of monarchy from Deuteronomy 17; Judges 8-9; 1 Samuel 8; the monarchy's tarnished legacy and divinely orchestrated collapse; the counter-testimony of certain prophets, historians, and poets; and the new direction God takes his people beginning with Jeremiah and culminating in Christ.

Yoder grants that pro-monarchical voices are preserved in the Old Testament. He argues, however, that these voices represent where certain Israelites were at in their self-understanding and are not endorsed by the Deuteronomistic editor, the final shape of the canon, or the culmination of Israel's story in Christ. Yoder argues further that, once the Israelites accept monarchy with its capital city and central shrine, there was no going back. These images became an indelible part of their self-understanding and frame of reference. God therefore meets them where they are at through his prophets and uses monarchical images—albeit after considerable transformation—to help them imagine the shape of their future salvation, which is characterized by a decisive movement away from monarchy like the nations.

## Review

Of all the areas of Yoder's Old Testament narration, his interpretation of the monarchy has received the least criticism. This likely reflects Yoder's readership more

than anything else.[46] It is also an area in which Yoder's narration has received

considerable support from the biblical studies guild. A few noteworthy Old Testament

scholars who support Yoder's overall reading of monarchy include Rainer Albertz, John

Bright, Frank Cross, Norman Gottwald, Millard Lind, Gordon McConville, and George

Mendenhall.[47] Not all scholars, however, agree with a negative assessment of Israel's

monarchy. J. J. M. Roberts offers a strong defense of monarchy, and other scholars

advocate multiple strands approaches that regard monarchy as positive in theory (thus the

pro-monarchical voices) and mostly negative in practice (thus the anti-monarchical

voices).[48] Though we will address the issue of whether Yoder has too low a view of

monarchy, it would take us too far afield to engage all the specific arguments for a high

view of monarchy. Rather, it is sufficient for our purposes to simply note that Yoder's

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[46] Yoder is read widely by Anabaptists and pacifist-leaning theologians, many of whom share his critique of militarism and its concomitant political structures.

[47] Rainer Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century*, Society of Biblical Literature, no. 3, trans. David Green (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); John Bright, *Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), 31-44, and *History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 184-228; Frank M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), 232-243; Norman Gottwald, "Early Israel as an Anti-Imperial Community," in *In the Shadow of Empire*, 9-23; Millard Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior*, 114-144; Gordon McConville, *God and Earthly Power*, 133-150, and "Law and Monarchy in the Old Testament," in *A Royal Priesthood*, 75-86; and George Mendenhall, "The Monarchy," *Interpretation* 29, no. 9 (Apr 1975): 155-170. Albertz often appears to adopt a diverse strands approach but, by the end of *Israel in Exile*, he argues that the cumulative effect of the diverse exilic voices is the foiling of imperial theology and sociology in preparation for Christ (441-45).

[48] J. J. M. Roberts, "In Defense of Monarchy: The Contribution of Israelite Kingship to Biblical Theology," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 377-396. See also Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 207-08. Brueggemann shares a negative assessment of what the monarchy accomplished in Israel while noting that there are many angles from which to view the text and that other angles evince a more positive view (*Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001], 23-25). He engages this diversity of views in *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), and 600-21. A similar approach is taken by J. David Pleins, *Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 98-115.

position is supported by many prominent Old Testament scholars and thus constitutes a

viable option to consider for ecclesiological reflection.

It is also worth noting that the study of the "Deuteronomistic history" (Joshua-

Kings) has advanced considerably since Yoder's day. This is important because Yoder

draws upon the final form of this corpus to mitigate the force of the pro-monarchical

strands within it. Thomas Römer's fresh work on this subject supports Yoder's thesis

even better than prior work. His findings confirm both a low view of monarchy and a

high view of diaspora.[49]

Though scholars offer broad support for Yoder's narration of monarchy, it

nonetheless raises critical questions that need to be answered. (1) Does not the cycle of

violence permeating the book of Judges support the notion that Israel needed a king?

Yoder's positive account of divine kingship and YHWH war and his negative account of

Israel's monarchy must reckon with the predominantly bleak tone of the book of Judges.

Yoder's optimism goes too far when he says, "the ad hoc mobilizations of the generations

before Samuel had been serving the nation quite adequately."[50] In fact, one of the

strongest arguments for a high estimation of kingship is the terrible way Israel's tribal

federation fared during the time of the Judges—a time in which "there was no king in

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[49] Thomas Römer, *So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical, and Literary Introduction* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007). Römer sets forth the history of Deuteronomic redaction in terms of three stages: (1) a Neo-Assyrian stage during which the material in Samuel and Kings was brought together to serve as royal propaganda in support of Josiah's reign (and not necessarily Israel's earlier kings); (2) a Neo-Babylonian stage during which the entire corpus is brought together for the first time and the exiles shaped the traditions in such a way as to highlight a lower view of monarchy; and (3) a Persian stage during which the low view of monarchy is strengthened and the diaspora is portrayed positively for those who never returned to the land.

[50] Yoder, "'To Your Tents, O Israel': The Legacy of Israel's Experience with Holy War," *Studies in Religion* 18, no. 3 (Sum 1989), 349.

Israel" and "all the people did what was right in their own eyes."[51] Against the background of the violent atrocities of those days (dismembering concubines, annihilating tribes, and stealing wives), this repeated phrase at the book's end appears to send a clear message: look how bad things were before Israel finally came to its senses, crowned a king, and made the structural adjustments necessary to become a "real" nation. This refrain is a strong canonical signal that Yoder never addresses. Indeed, the gruesome narrative of Judges calls into question Yoder's decision to locate Israel's deformation as late as the monarchy.[52]

(2) Is Yoder too hard on monarchy? The answer to this question is largely dependent upon whether one is persuaded by Yoder's narration. Yoder is not too hard on the monarchy if part of why God calls Israel out of Babylon and Egypt is so they might be a witness against monarchy. Yoder is not too hard on the monarchy if Torah is normative for Israel's life and if the monarchy resulted in Torah's eclipse. Yoder is not too hard on the monarchy if the monarchy constituted, from YHWH's perspective, a replacement of his effective reign with that of humanity. Yoder is not too hard on monarchy if Deuteronomy 17 represents the kind of monarchy YHWH could approve and if that kind of monarchy never truly materialized in Israel. Yoder is not too hard on monarchy if Hosea is right that God gave Israel a king in his anger and took him away in

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[51] Cf. Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; and 21:25. This point is made by Roberts, "In Defense of the Monarchy," in *Ancient Israelite Religion*, 377-396, esp. 377.

[52] The pro-monarchical reading of Judges is supported by Yairah Amit, *The Book of Judges: the Art of Editing*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999), 314. A negative assessment of Judges is sometimes coupled with a negative view of Samuel. Roberts argues that the failure of Samuel to raise sons who could continue his work is a further blow to the judge model and thus constitutes further support for monarchy ("In Defense of Monarchy," 381). McConville counters, however, that the account of Samuel's wicked sons belongs to a larger motif about the problems of dynastic succession (a problem as old as Gideon, but seen in Eli, Samuel, David, Hezekiah, Josiah, et al.). Far from delegitimizing judges in favor of monarchy, Samuel's wicked sons sound a sober warning against the dynastic aspect of monarchy (McConville, *God and Earthly Power*, 96-97).

his wrath (Hos 13:11). Finally, Yoder is not too hard on monarchy if he can plausibly narrate it as another instance in which God used the problematic decision of his rebellious people, despite its inherent liabilities, to accomplish some good and to expand their imaginations about the kingdom to come.

Yoder's low view of Israel's monarchy is not negated by the fact that the monarchy brought stability to Canaan *or* that some of Israel's kings were better than others and exemplary in certain ways *or* that Israel envisioned a better future in monarchical terms *or* that there is a hypothetical vision of human kingship that would be a tremendous blessing to any nation *or* that Isaiah transformed Israel's image of a future king in ways that Jesus later came to fulfill. None of these positive appropriations of the monarchy negate Yoder's low view of Israel's monarchy because, since the beginning, Israel's God has revealed himself as one who takes human mistakes, does good with them, and redeems them by enfolding them into his creative transformational purposes. This does not alter the fact that the only monarchy Israel knew was a decisive detour in Israel's formation that God patiently worked with, waited through, and eventually went beyond. That being the case, monarchy is not the kind of institution that should be imitated or recovered. Rather, it should be stubbornly remembered so God's people might never repeat its debilitating features in new and contemporary forms.

Having said this, two qualifiers should be issued, one that requires brief mention and another that requires considerable explaining. The first qualifier is that, for the purposes of ecclesiology, Yoder does not need to argue that monarchy is wrong in principle.[53] He only needs to argue that those innovations that monarchy introduced into

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[53] There is reason to think Yoder's stance was not as absolute as it may seem. Cf. "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," in *JCSR*, 84-85.

Israel's life *that constitute a departure from Torah* should not be regarded as exemplary, especially since God later reconfigures his people's lives so as to effectively undo those innovations. The second qualifier is that conversations about monarchy are often set back by lack of terminological precision. Such imprecision leads to misunderstanding about the nature of Christ's fulfillment of Israel's monarchy. Scripture engages multiple versions of monarchy and does not regard them all equally. The following typology sketches six such versions:

1. Nations' kingship: the common practice of the ancient near east[54]
2. Torah kingship: the vision of Deuteronomy 17, which never truly materialized[55]
3. Israel's actual kingship: the adaptation of the nations' kingship accompanied, at times, with the attempt to remain subordinate to YHWH's reign[56]
4. Israel's idealized kingship: the anticipation of a future king who is an idealized version of Israel's kingship combined with elements of Torah kingship[57]
5. Servant kingship: the anticipation of a future king combining Israel's idealized kingship with new emphases on lowliness, dejectedness, and mission to the nations[58]
6. Jesus' kingship: stands in continuity with the Torah kingship, idealized kingship, and servant kingship; stands in discontinuity with the nations' kingship, as well as Israel's actual experience of kingship

This typology illustrates how the notion of kingship applies to a wide variety of phenomena in Scripture. It would be entirely appropriate to place them in canonical order and to identify a trajectorial movement that culminates in Christ, who fulfills each one. However, it is not valid to turn the trajectory around in order to argue that Christ

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[54] For a thorough description of Canaanite royal ideology, cf. Mowinckel, *He That Cometh: The Messiah Concept in Old Testament and Later Judaism*, trans. G. W. Anderson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005; originally 1956), 23-56.

[55] Josiah comes close but eventually succumbs to politics as usual and dies in battle (2 Kgs 22-23).

[56] For a helpful sketch of the development of Israelite royal ideology from its Canaanite base, cf. Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, 21-95.

[57] E.g., Isa 9:2-7.

[58] E.g., Isa 42-53.

accredits them all since he fulfills them all. Rather, because Christ is their fulfillment, his reign establishes the criteria by which we may evaluate them and their faithfulness to the messianic vision. To the extent that Christ fulfilled most of the royal descriptions in Deuteronomy 17 and the servant songs, we may say that they point to his reign remarkably well.

When one compares Christ to the actual and idealized versions of Israel's kingship, the likeness begins to break down, although the idealized version breaks down only in those areas that replicate and extend Israel's actual monarchy. Jesus did not assume a throne in Jerusalem, build himself a house, stake out imperial territory, establish a glorious architectural dwelling place for God, recruit a standing army, train a royal choir, write psalms, collect proverbs, subjugate his enemies violently, amass wealth, or forge marital alliances. In fact, one is hard-pressed to find Jesus perpetuating any of David's monarchical innovations. Instead, he calls into question many of the ways David accomplished most of the "good" he accomplished. Jesus dealt with enemies through love and not through the sword. Jesus announced the destruction of the physical temple and offered no hope of its renewal. Jesus sent his followers away from Jerusalem and made no provisions for its eschatological future. Jesus set people free rather than enslave them economically or subject them to forced labor. Jesus brought greater equality to the people, not greater disparity. It is thus evident that, even though Jesus shared David's royal title and bloodline, for the most part his reign realized Israel's hopes for a kind of king that Israel never actually experienced. Jesus' fulfillment of Israel's monarchy therefore stands in judgment of Israel's actual monarchy in the same way that his fulfillment of Israel's Torah stood in judgment of the Jewish leaders' versions of it.

(3) If David was a man after God's own heart, how can he be construed as the figurehead for everything that went wrong with Israel? Put differently, Yoder presents a rather one-dimensional view of David. In many places, Scripture speaks of him in glowing terms, yet Yoder reduces him to a mere foil. This is partly a methodological question insofar as it highlights the selectivity of Yoder's treatment of David. Yoder wittingly gave scant attention to the lives of many persons whom he used to represent important developments within Israel's story. This is a matter of literary technique.[59] Yoder was not offering a biography of David but an overview of Israel's history. Though he could have chosen Saul, Solomon, Jeroboam, or Manasseh, Yoder chose David to represent monarchy, perhaps because David is a common reference point. The more important question is: Does a careful reading of David's life comport with Yoder's narration? This question is addressed below.

(4) Does not the book of Psalms, for the most part, advocate a high view of kingship? Nearly half are associated with David, additional psalms offer praise and prayer for the king, and an entire sub-collection revolves around the pious ascent to the city that David established to visit the temple that he had built.[60] Together, these

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[59] It is a common feature of Yoder's writing style that he referred to time periods, sociological configurations, and theological developments in terms of key representative persons. For example, David = Israel's monarchy; Ezra/Nehemiah = Israel's refortification as a Persian vassal; Jeremiah = Jewish acceptance of monarchy's ultimate demise and diaspora's rise as God's preferred posture for his people; Joseph/Daniel/Esther = witness on foreign soil; Maccabeans/Bar Kochba/Zealots = failed violent Jewish attempts to reestablish the monarchy; Jochanan ben Zakkai = Jewish resistance to the violent reconstitution of Israelite statehood; Constantine = the Church's accommodation to the prevailing governmental structure; and the Niebuhr brothers = the face of contemporary Constantinian theology. One should not presume that Yoder had a simplistic understanding of any of these figures. They are usually pointers to trains of thought that he developed at length somewhere else in his writing. One does not, therefore, discredit Yoder's narration simply by demonstrating that David, Jeremiah, Esther, and Constantine were actually a lot more complex than Yoder indicates in various places. These persons do not function for him as uninformed caricatures; they function as convenient reference points for a complex constellation of events and ideas.

[60] The David collections include: 3-41, 51-72, and 138-145; the royal psalms include: 2, 20, 21, 45, 63, 72, 89, 101, 101, 132, and 144; and the psalms of ascent include 120-134.

monarchial psalms constitute nearly two-thirds of the Psalter. Since the Psalms have played a critical role in the Church's worship and devotional life and because royal themes pervade the Psalter, it is little wonder that Christians tend to have a high view of David and the monarchy despite the tarnished track record of both in the Deuteronomistic history.[61]

Appearances may be deceiving. Gerald Wilson's pioneering work on the canonical form of Psalms provides helpful insight into the royal theology of the collection in its final form.[62] Wilson notes that books one through three of the Psalter (Pss 1-89) revolve around the theme of covenant and contain five subthemes: the covenant (often Davidic) has been established in the distant past; the Davidic covenant is broken; God extends the covenant to all of David's descendants; psalmists hope that YHWH will reestablish the covenant; and psalmists long for the restoration of David's kingship. This section extols human kingship, peaking in Psalm 72, but then ends in Psalm 89 by lamenting the demise of kingship, thereby leaving the reader wondering what God might do next. Will he restore his covenant with David and with Israel?

A fourfold answer comes in book four (Pss 90-106): YHWH is king; YHWH was Israel's refuge before monarchy; YHWH is Israel's refuge now; and blessed are those who trust in YHWH. Book five (Pss 107-150) then applies the answer given in book four to the situation of those in exile. It teaches that deliverance depends on trust, that David has modeled that trust, that ultimate trust is demonstrated in obedience to Torah, and that YHWH is king. Seen from this canonical perspective, the Psalter does not sing the praises

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[61] Preben Vang and Terry G. Carter, *Telling God's Story: The Biblical Narrative from Beginning to End* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 112.

[62] Gerald Henry Wilson, *Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 139-228.

of monarchy; it directs praise away from the human king and toward the divine king.[63] If Wilson's reconstruction is right in this regard, the book of Psalms is a microcosm of Yoder's narration of the Old Testament as a whole. Though specific passages speak well of Israel's monarchy, the wider canonical shape makes clear that monarchy cannot deliver and that God's people must trust in YHWH alone.

<div align="center">Fundamental Corrective</div>

The period of the Judges was an ambiguous time for Israel. Yoder overstates the case when he speaks of it in nostalgic terms as the time when Israel did just fine without a king.[64] The people did not do just fine during this period, at least not for long. The book's introductory chapters emphasize that soon after entering the land, the Israelites broke covenant with God (Judg 2:20) and forgot about him altogether (Judg 2:10). Cycles of unfaithfulness, punishment, and deliverance thereafter permeate the narrative. Though Yoder is right to acknowledge the mid-book rejection of kingship by Gideon and Jotham, his account must reckon with the book's closing line: "there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." The fourfold repetition of this line in the closing chapters of Judges is clearly intentional.[65] This repeated line frames a section

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[63] Supporting Wilson's contention that the kingship motif is important to the final editor of the Psalter is that the psalms that are located along the seams between books appear to relate to this topic. For instance, Ps 106 (the last psalm of book four) tells Israel's story from Egypt to diaspora (v. 47) while ignoring Israel's kings altogether, and Ps 145 (the last psalm of book five proper) issues a repeated call to seek God's kingdom. However, human kingship is not altogether absent from book five; it is central to Pss 110 and 132. Regardless, it should be noted that Yoder's narration is not dependent upon Wilson's particular thesis. Yoder has already acknowledged the multiplicity of voices in the Old Testament. Though Wilson's thesis strengthens Yoder's case, Yoder would likely find it more confirming that, in fulfilling the royal language in many Psalms, Jesus shows us what true kingship entails and warns us against counterfeits.

[64] Yoder, "To Your Tents," 349. In Yoder's favor, however, Isaiah did not view this period as being one-sidedly negative as evident in his longing for the restoration of Israel's judges (Isa 1:26).

about a tribe that robs a man of his personal priest and idol, a tribe that rapes the concubine of a guest, and the near extinction of another tribe. These events are all told in disturbing detail, thereby indicating that the absence of a king was viewed at least somewhat negatively.

We thus appear to have two contradictory layers of evidence. On the one hand, we have the sorry state of affairs in Israel that seems to require the kingship; on the other hand, we have the negative critique of kingship in both Gideon's day and that of Samuel. Some argue that Judges is pro-monarchy and find ways of reinterpreting the negative critiques.[66] Others, like Yoder, argue that the book is anti-monarchy and ignore or minimize the force of seemingly pro-monarchical material.[67] Still others argue that it is neither pro- nor anti-monarchy but suspicious of all forms of human rule.[68]

Another approach is to say that the problem of Judges was Israel's failure to keep covenant with God. Because they failed to do so (Judg 2), the Israelites lived under neither God's reign nor a human king. Though God would occasionally save his people from absolute ruin, they were by no means living as a people of Torah with its accompanying divine blessing. The tenth-century prophet Azariah summarizes this period well: "For a long time Israel was without the true God, and without a teaching priest, and without law; but when they turned to the LORD, the God of Israel, and sought him, he was found by them. In those times it was not safe for anyone to go or come, for great disturbances afflicted all the inhabitants of the lands. They were broken in pieces, nation

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[65] Cf. Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; and 21:25. However, 18:1 and 19:1 only repeat the first half of this line, which pertains to the absence of a king.

[66] E.g., Amit, *Book of Judges*.

[67] E.g., Barry Webb, *Book of Judges: An Integrated Reading* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 202-203.

[68] E.g., McConville, *God and Earthly Power*, 118-132.

against nation and city against city, for God troubled them with every sort of distress" (2 Chron 15:3-6).[69]

Azariah sees that Israel's experience in Judges is not significantly different from that of the early divided kingdom. What is missing in both is not a human king, but a Torah-keeping people. The way forward for both is to call upon God and to renew the covenant. Without God's blessing, however, the Israelites felt the pressure of the nations around them and began to strategize how they might protect themselves by their own strength. The end of Judges, with its drumbeat cadence concerning the absence of a king, thus reflects the people's—and not God's—growing desire for one. That desire is ominously foreshadowed in the time of Gideon, but gains considerable momentum as the book draws to a close. This momentum peaks in 1 Samuel when the people finally demand a king against divine misgivings.

In sum, the book of Judges offers neither a single voice for or against kingship nor a cacophony of competing voices. It is a unified picture of a floundering nation that abandons God's covenant and attempts to make structural adaptations that further violate God's will in order to cope with their need to secure their own survival in the absence of divine blessing. In my revision, then, the abandonment of covenant that begins the book of Judges marks the beginning of Israel's deformation. Kingship is the culmination and perhaps most concrete social expression of that abandonment, since the Israelites resort to monarchy in an attempt to compensate for the resulting loss of divine blessing.

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[69] It is interesting that Azariah, who spoke these words to a king, characterizes this period as lacking God, teaching priest, and Torah—not king. The fact that the text emphasizes the teaching office of priest underscores that the core problem was lack of Torah instruction and observance.

Ancillary Concern

A more detailed account of David's life would complement Yoder's narration

well. It could be argued that the motif around which David's life revolves is the choice

between trusting God alone for strength and trusting in the sword. Space does not allow

for a full exploration of this theme, but a few highlights can point the way. In Scripture,

we first encounter David refusing the king's armor, trusting God alone, and slaying a

giant (1 Sam 17). God then prospers David in all that he does. After this promising start,

however, David makes a foreboding gesture by acquiring Goliath's sword for himself, the

sword of the man he insisted on killing without a sword by God's strength alone (1 Sam

21:9). This ambiguous move does not immediately appear to signal a change in David's

values. We find him inquiring of the Lord before going into battle (1 Sam 23:2, 4),

valuing the life of an enemy who is trying to kill him (1 Sam 24:4-7; 26:9), and insisting

that vengeance belongs to God alone (1 Sam 24:12; 26:10). Though David almost

forsakes these high values when Naval denies him hospitality, Abigail intervenes to keep

him from vengeance and bloodshed—an intervention for which David was truly grateful

(1 Sam 25:33).[70]

Things change, however, when David becomes king. He inquires of the Lord at

first, but soon begins to act independently. A major turning point is his affair with

Bathsheba and subsequent murder of her husband, Uriah (2 Sam 11). After this, his life is

filled with unrest and the sword (2 Sam 12:9-10). This culminates in an enumeration of

David's trusted fighting men (2 Sam 23) and the census that sealed David's fate (2 Sam

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[70] That the Nabal incident is placed between the two narratives concerning Saul may indicate that David is more susceptible to disregarding the life of common man than he is royalty. This same partisanship shows up after David becomes king as evident in the prophet Nathan's condemnation of David (2 Sam 12:1-9).

24). Counting his fighting men was the last straw. David shows himself to have become a man who trusts the sword and not YHWH. This reversal is most evident in David's dying days when he commissions Solomon to take revenge upon his enemies, even those whose lives he previously vowed to spare (1 Kgs 2:8; cf. 2 Sam 19:23).

Before becoming king, David had a godly heart. He valued others' lives and trusted God alone, that is, until he wore the crown. Though he began well as king, his heart began to change. By the book's end, he committed adultery, murdered an innocent man, broke away from reliance upon God alone, exhibited undue trust in military prowess, and became a man of deadly revenge who retracted previous acts of mercy. His character had inverted like Saul before him. After picking up Goliath's sword, David became another Goliath and, because of this, he was not allowed to build the temple (1 Chron 22:8). In rejecting YHWH war and YHWH's reign, he became the monarchical figurehead that Yoder's narration needed.[71]

## Re-Formation

### Recap

Yoder's interpretations of the Jewish diaspora and refortification projects of Ezra and Nehemiah are the most innovative and resisted components of his Old Testament narration. Yoder begins with the sack of Jerusalem in 586, which spelled the end of Israel's monarchy and the inevitability of long term dispersion. God's people were thereafter forced to rethink Jewish identity which, for many Jews, had become inseparable from monarchical and palestinocentric existence. Some followed Jeremiah

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[71] This does not mean David did nothing noble and is not admirable in many ways. It means that trust in and recourse to the sword is the area in which Scripture portrays David as doing the most wrong.

29:4-7 and learned to embrace long-term subsistence on foreign soil. Others continued to live on familiar turf, albeit under foreign oversight.

According to Yoder, these events were not a temporary detour but a permanent reconfiguration of Jewish peoplehood. God's salvific purposes were moving beyond Palestine. He was positioning his people for global mission by stripping them of provincialism and dressing them for a more cosmopolitan way of being in the world. This meant ordering their lives around Torah, not terrain. It meant replacing temple and king with synagogue and a plurality of leaders. It meant that unity would no longer be secured locally through civil institutions but maintained globally through intervisitation, intermarriage, commerce, and rabbinic consultation. It meant a new way of thinking theologically about God's work among the nations, his people's relationship with non-Jews, and the structures by which God's people order their lives. For all these reasons, attempts to reestablish palestinocentric existence as more than simply another diasporic Jewish outpost are at best naïve and at worst deviations from the divine mission.

Yoder therefore looked upon the refortification projects of Ezra and Nehemiah with suspicion. Though he affirms their efforts to restore Jerusalem in non-monarchical fashion, he questions the extent to which they rely upon Persian power to do so. Yoder is even more suspicious of later attempts to regain Jewish national independence by the Maccabees, Bar Kochba, and zealots. God's failure to prosper them confirms Yoder's notion that he has left independent Jewish nationhood behind. The most definitive confirmation of Yoder's narration, however, is the transethnic, transterritorial, counter-imperial direction God heads through Christ, his Spirit, and the Church.

Review

Though few scholars have directly engaged Yoder's narration of the Jewish

diaspora and refortification, much of his narration benefits from widespread scholarly

corroboration.[72] Three scholars, in particular, have supported Yoder's work and extended

it in their respective fields. Jewish scholar Daniel Boyar in has enthusiastically endorsed

Yoder's notion of diasporic Jewish identity in both the Old Testament and Rabbinic

Judaism and found it largely compatible with his own work.[73] Old Testament scholar

Daniel Smith-Christopher has worked extensively on the nature of exile, its impact on

Old Testament Israel, and its on-going relevance to Christian self-understanding in ways

that deepen and extend Yoder's own work.[74] Christian peace-maker and theologian Alain

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[72] Cf. Albertz, *Israel in Exile*, esp. 439-445; Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 111-120; Bright, *Kingdom of God*, 127-186; Robert P. Carroll, "Deportation and Diasporic Discourses in the Prophetic Literature," in *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions*, ed. James M. Scott (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 37-62; Andrew Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), 216-256; James C. VanderKam, "Exile in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature," in *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian*, 89-109. Albertz agrees that though various biblical sources deal with the loss of monarchy in diverse ways, the end result is a sociological transformation that frees God's people from the monarchical merger and creatively postures them for global mission. Berquist suspects, like Yoder, that Ezra and Nehemiah's work was subservient to the agenda of the Persian Empire. Bright shares Yoder's low view of the monarchy and the restoration projects of Ezra and Nehemiah. Carroll argues that images of a return to Jerusalem were not as fundamental to actual diasporic Jewish hope as many scholars assume. Mein argues that God altered his people's posture through exile such that they would not assume responsibility for world justice or work for national restoration, but must wait upon God. VanderKam argues that Jewish apocalypses depict exile as an ongoing condition that may never end in history and express minimal concern for a return from exile.

[73] Daniel Boyarin, "Foreword," to Alain Epp Weaver, *States of Exile: Visions of Diaspora, Witness, and Return* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2008), 9-10; *Powers of Diaspora* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minneapolis Press, 2002), with Jonathan Boyarin; *Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1997); and "Judaism as a Free Church: Footnotes to John Howard Yoder's *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*," in *Cross Currents* 54, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 6-21. This last article was originally an AAR paper to which five readers responded: Laura L. Brenneman, Gerald J. Biesecker-Mast, Randi Rashkover, Alain Epp Weaver, and J. Denny Weaver. Their responses also engage Yoder's work on exile and are also included in volume 54 of *Cross Currents*.

[74] Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *Biblical Theology of Exile*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002); "Quiet Words of the Wise: Biblical Developments toward Nonviolence as a Diaspora Ethic," in *Character Ethics and the Old Testament*, 129-150; "Reassessing the Historical and Sociological Impact of the Babylonian Exile (597/587-539)," in *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions*, 7-36; and *Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile* (Bloomington, IN: Meyer Stone Books, 1989).

Epp Weaver has both clarified common misunderstandings of Yoder's work on diaspora and extended it in ecclesial and political contexts.[75] Yoder's narration also finds support in the work of scholars who do not necessarily follow his Old Testament narration but who argue with differing nuances that Jesus fulfills Israel's hopes for land, city, and temple in ways that stand in fundamental continuity with the Old Testament.[76] This is important for Yoder because his canonical-directional approach affirms a consistent trajectory from Moses to Christ.

Yoder's narration also has its detractors. Some object to its monolithic reading of Jeremiah and diaspora. Ochs, for instance, accuses Yoder of building a "beautiful monument of one chapter of Jeremiah's ministry" that cannot be supported by the book of Jeremiah as a whole. Cartwright faults him for breaking up the inviolable Jewish triad of "Torah, land, and people." Most objections, however, have to do with Yoder's pejorative interpretation of Ezra and Nehemiah's refortification projects.[77] These objections will now be addressed in terms of three questions. The first two lose much of

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[75] Alain Epp Weaver, "John Howard Yoder's 'Alternative Perspective' on Christian-Jewish Relations," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 79 (July 2005): 295-328; "On Exile," in *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder's Contributions to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking*, eds. Ben C. Ollenburger and Gayle Gerber Koontz (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2004), 161-186; and *States of Exile*. For the practical expression of Weaver's thought, cf. "Mennonite Witness, U.S. Power, and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict," in *Exiles in the Empire: Believers Church Perspectives on Politics*, eds. Nathan E. Yoder and Carol A. Scheppard (Kitschener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2006), 113-132.

[76] Brueggemann, *The Land*, 157-172; Davies, *Gospel and the Land*, 161-366 [Davies emphasizes a diversity of New Testament responses to the land]; David E. Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 59-146; Michael Horton, *People and Place: Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 268-271.

[77] Ochs, "Commentary," on ch. 10, in *JCSR*, 204; Cartwright, "Afterword," in *JCSR*, 218-19, 223; Goldingay, *Israel's Gospel*, vol. 1 of *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 764, fn. 86; Kissling, "Can John Howard Yoder's Ethics Embrace the Entire Old Testament as Scripture?" no pagination; Reimer, "Theological Orthodoxy and Jewish Christianity," in *Wisdom of the Cross*, 444-445; and A. Weaver, "John Howard Yoder's Alternative Perspectives," 299, n. 14.

their force upon careful examination; the third does not and calls for considerable revision.

(1) Can the book of Jeremiah bear all the weight Yoder places upon it? More specifically, did the prophet really think he was signaling the end of palestinocentric existence and the beginning of a whole new way of being God's people? Could he possibly have envisioned that his instructions for the exiles in Babylon might become the charter for all God's people everywhere until the eschaton? From a purely historical perspective, the answer is probably no. Jeremiah likely expected Israel to return to the land and reestablish Jerusalem so that all nations would stream to it for instruction.[78] He probably viewed exile as yet another detour along the way to Israel's palestinocentric future glory. Likewise, the authors of Ezra, Nehemiah, and the post-exilic prophets probably all imagined that God would soon fully restore Jerusalem far beyond the anti-climactic restoration they had witnessed.[79]

But all of this misses Yoder's point. Yoder is neither a professed Jew who reads Israel's history primarily in light of subsequent rabbinic developments, nor an Old Testament scholar who locates the text's meaning primarily in authorial intent. He is a Christocentric biblical realist who reads all of Scripture and history in light of God's definitive revelation of his ultimate purposes in Christ and his Church. To understanding Yoder's interpretation on its own terms, we must consider that the Messiah had already come and distanced himself from the Jerusalem establishment, that the Messiah did not reconstitute Israel as a palestinocentric community of faith but prepared his people to be

[78] Cf. Jer 3:14-17; 16:14-15; 23:5-8; 33:4-18; and 50:5, 28.

[79] E.g., Isa 60:1-22 and Zech 14:3-21.

scattered throughout the world by his Spirit, and that previously scattered Jews as far back as Jeremiah formed synagogues throughout the world that became central to the Church's missionary expansion.[80] In short, the strength in Yoder's position lies not in sixth-century prophecy and history, but in the first-century revelation of God's purposes through the Messiah, Holy Spirit, and Church. From Yoder's perspective, we ought to ask not only what Jeremiah and Ezra thought they were saying to sixth-century Jews, but also what God is saying through them to post-Pentecost Christians.

(2) Does Yoder break up the triad of Torah, land, and people that is so important to Jewish identity? I suspect Yoder would have answered this by suggesting that the three components of this triad are not as static as the question presumes—and must presume if it is to have any force. What "people" is being addressed? (Is circumcision required? Must one be born of a Jewish woman? Do first century messianic Christians count?) What definition of "Torah" is presumed? (The words of the Pentateuch? Jesus' fulfillment of those words? The Torah of Rabbinic Judaism?) What does "land" mean? (The Promised Land parameters originally given to Abraham? The boundaries of Israel at the height of the united monarchy? The contemporary state of Israel?) How one answers these questions determines how one assesses Yoder's relation to this Jewish triad.

In Yoder's account, "people" has been widened to include those who have been incorporated into the new humanity made possible by Christ. "Torah" has been widened to include Christ's interpretation of it in light of the kingdom. "Land" has been widened, until Christ's return, to include every city to which God's Spirit scatters his people to be his witnesses as resident aliens whose citizenship is in heaven. If the New Testament represents genuine messianic Jewish identity, then Yoder's account adheres to the full

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[80] More New Testament evidence is listed at the end of chapter 4.

canonical form of this triad. If, however, the triad of which Cartwright speaks is the more

limited triad of Rabbinic Judaism,[81] then in violating this triad Yoder is simply echoing

the prior New Testament "violation" of this triad by Paul, following Jesus, guided by the

Spirit. It is fitting, then, for Yoder to honor the form of this triad that stands in continuity

with the redefinition of people, land, and Torah wrought by Israel's messiah.

(3) Is Yoder justified in maintaining his pejorative reading of palestinocentric

existence, the city of Jerusalem, and the return from exile?[82] The answer to this question

is no, for several reasons: God's promise of land to Abraham is central to Torah, late Old

Testament and early Christian texts consistently accord Jerusalem a place of special

honor,[83] and post-exilic biblical texts portray the return from exile, despite its

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[81] In *States of Exile*, 55-57, A. Weaver defends Yoder against Cartwright's charge of breaking the Jewish triad and suggests that the definition of viable landed existence that Cartwright presumes is that of "*Dabru Emet*: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity," in *Jews and Christians: People of God*, eds. Carl E. Braatan and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 179-82. The third section of this statement calls Christians to honor the Jewish people's claim upon the land of Israel and applauds Christian support of the state of Israel. Though this ecumenical document signals a watershed in Jewish-Christian relations and should be celebrated in many regards, the third section presumes the sort of Old Testament narration that Yoder questions and in no way represents the "Christian" position on the state of Israel or the New Testament's teaching. For example, Paul argues, in Romans 4:13-25, that those who believe in Christ are heirs to the promise and inheritance of Abraham. If the promise to Abraham necessarily entails Palestine, then it is not clear how Christians may grant the heirs of Rabbinic Judaism an exclusive claim on this land (i.e., insisting that it belongs to Jews but not also to Christians) without effectively erasing the Jewishness of first century Christians, including Jesus and Paul.

[82] For instance, Yoder refers to Ezra and Nehemiah as "politicking elders" and negatively narrates their work as "too early returns to the land," "inappropriate deviations from the Jeremiah line," and a "mistake." Cf. "See How They Go," in *JCSR*, 193-194.

[83] Cf. Ezek 40-48; Zech 2:1-5; 8:1-8; 14:3-21; and Dan 6:10. These are important witnesses since Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Daniel stand out among late Old Testament texts in corroborating Yoder's thesis that post-exilic Israel recovered the practice of not taking matters into their own hands but relying solely on YHWH's deliverance. That reverence for Jerusalem continued into the Common Era is evident on a small scale in Mary and Joseph's annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover (Luke 2:41) and on a large scale when thousands of Jews responded to the gospel message after having flocked to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost (Acts 2). See also Paul's desire late in life to visit Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost (Acts 20:16). Finally, as discussed above, Jesus acknowledged Jerusalem's importance to Christian mission in Luke 24:44-47. Two works accentuating the abiding importance of Jerusalem and the Temple include Davies, *Gospel and the Land*, 49-154; and Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Christianity* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2002), 87-102 and 147-163.

shortcomings, as the providential act of God.[84] Though many Jews of this time may have overestimated the eschatological significance of these events, there is little reason to deny Scripture's testimony that God was instrumental in reestablishing the post-exilic community.

<div align="center">Fundamental Corrective</div>

The revision Yoder's narration requires is best seen in contrast to the kind of narration Yoder likely sought to transcend. David Holwerda's interpretation of the refortification efforts of Ezra and Nehemiah represents the strongest alternative to Yoder's own narration.[85] Holwerda's account of this period begins by acknowledging that the rebuilt temple did not live up to Israel's expectations. He interprets this partial rebuilding as both a fulfillment of God's earlier promises to Israel and an anticipation of its more complete fulfillment that would occur "in the days of the Messiah."[86] He goes on to interpret the restoration of Israel's land in the same way and adds that the restoration could only be partial because only righteousness and holiness can bring the fullness for which Israel hoped.[87] This means that only Jesus can bring fulfillment and therein lies the problem. Because many Jews later reject Jesus, the promises could not be fulfilled in Jerusalem and the city therefore loses soteriological significance.[88]

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[84] For perceived shortcomings, cf. Ezra 3:10-13; Neh 9:36; and Hag 2:1-3. More positively, Ezra and Nehemiah saw God's hand working mightily in their initial return, refortification, and reform projects (Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:23; Neh 2:12, 18, 20; 4:15; 6:16; and 12:43). Likewise, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah discerned God's direct involvement in the Temple rebuilding of the "messianic" leaders Zerubbabel and Joshua (Hag 1:7-14; Zech 3:1-4:14; 6:9-15; and 8:1-14).

[85] Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel*, 59-112.

[86] Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel*, 65.

[87] Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel*, 100-101.

[88] Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel*, 108-109.

For Holwerda, the restorative efforts of Ezra, Nehemiah, and others evinced an already-but-not-yet scenario. God's promises were only partly fulfilled; the fullness awaits Christ or, perhaps, the eschaton. This provides a convenient parallel to the shape of Christian hope, but it is flawed in some respects. The governing dynamic behind the already-but-not-yet framework is that what is experienced now participates somewhat in the future to come. For instance, the already-but-not-yet nature of God's kingdom in Christian theology has three phases: the old age with its characteristics, the new age with new characteristics, and the already-but-not-yet age which reflects some characteristics of the new age already, but some still of the old.[89] The problem with comparing the temple and city rebuilding efforts of Ezra and Nehemiah to the already-but-not-yet schema is that many prominent aspects of the return to the land are not characteristic of the new age that began with Christ and awaits completion upon his return. In some respects, the opposite happens with Jesus. What was gained in the post-exilic restoration was a puny-sized return to the old age of Solomon with its temple, ruler, priests, and walls. If these aspects of their projects should be counted as already-but-not-yet, how much more the Maccabean independence project and Herod's later building of a magnificent new temple?

On the contrary, the diasporic reconfiguration projects pioneered, wittingly or not, by Jeremiah and the latter parts of Isaiah have much more in common with Jesus and the Holy Spirit's reconfiguration of God's people. Their reconfiguration entailed not only transterritoriality but also lack of temple, capital city, ethnic homogeneity, and statehood's structures of protection. Holwerda's already-but-not-yet framework is thus

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[89] Yoder discusses the already-but-not-yet shape of Christian eschatology in "If Christ is Truly Lord," in *Original Revolution* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 63-64.

only appropriate regarding those aspects of Ezra and Nehemiah's reforms that point toward the kind of kingdom Jesus inaugurated. For instance, Holwerda could emphasize their unity around God's Word, their plurality of leadership, their adaptation to life without a king like the nations, and their need to trust God alone for their security. These sixth-century developments point to Christ's Kingdom in ways that the Maccabeans do not. It is important to acknowledge, however, that such developments are not exclusive to the Jerusalemite community; they are shared by diasporic Jews. Jerusalemites did not lead the way in these areas; exiles from Babylon did. Nonetheless, Holwerda is right, over against Yoder, to insist that the return to Palestine, refortification of Jerusalem, and rebuilding of its temple accomplished something uniquely important for the messianic age that the diaspora communities could not, even if these accomplishments are not best conveyed by the already-but-not-yet framework.

An adequate revision of Yoder's narration would have to offer a robust explanation why it was important for God to restore a remnant of his people in ways that stand in fundamental continuity with Israel's palestinocentric past. Such a revision might suggest that God had two purposes that would be carried out by two distinct equally Jewish groups following monarchy's collapse. One purpose, embodied in Jeremiah's commission, required God's people to begin spreading throughout the earth in ways that prepare for the future messianic mission. These Jews would learn what it means to be God's people on foreign soil without the securities and resources the Israelites once had in Jerusalem. These exiles would also provide the important transterritorial infrastructure that later facilitates the advance of the Gospel. The resulting network of synagogues gave messianic missionaries a place to evangelize, a group of people to work with, and a

model for diasporic community formation. God's other purpose, as discussed previously, required maintaining a clear sense of Jewish identity back in Jerusalem in preparation for Jesus, who would launch the global messianic mission from there. Far from abandoning Jerusalem because of the people's unfaithfulness, God fulfills his purpose for Jerusalem and honors his chosen people by launching his salvific mission from there and not some other diasporic locale. Since God was not going to restore Jerusalem in the way that many Jews expected, it was imperative that he not allow Palestinian Israelites to throw off the shackles of Babylon and reestablish palestinocentric Jewish glory. God therefore used a pagan ruler to defeat Babylon and to reestablish southern Palestine as Yehud, a Persian province.[90]

It was fitting that God would have Persian rulers send certain Jews from the Persian heartland to Jerusalem to help Jews back home negotiate their new non-monarchical existence. The aptitudes these Jews gained in exile and their familiarity with the nature of Persian rule uniquely equipped them to reestablish Jerusalem in diasporic fashion. This was strategic both on Persia's part, minimizing the possibility of revolt, and God's part, minimizing the possibility that Jews would get the false impression that Israel was being restored in monarchical fashion.

It was also necessary, however, to maintain a strong sense of continuity with Israel of old. The partially restored temple and city helped serve that purpose. It was

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[90] For the use of the term "Yehud," cf. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow*, 131-144. For a concise account of what it meant for Jews to subsist under Persian rule, cf. Berquist, "Resistance and Accommodation in the Persian Empire," in *In the Shadow of Empire*, 41-58. Advocates of abiding palestinocentrism are right in noting that the Hebrew canon closes, in 2 Chronicles 36:23, with the hopeful charge to Jewish exiles: "Let him go up" (E.g., Cartwright, "Afterword," in *JCSR*, 219). They must not forget, however, who is issuing this decree. The Persian king Cyrus is speaking and he prefaces this charge with the announcement that YHWH had given *him*—and not the Israelites—all the kingdoms of the earth, and that YHWH had commissioned *him* to rebuild the Jerusalem temple. This only supports Yoder's thesis that what transpired after the return of the exiles was as much a Persian project as a Jewish one.

familiar enough to hold together Jewish identity as God's set apart people and diminished enough to show that it was not the glorious fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy. The temple was stripped of its connections to the monarchy and made to function more like the original tabernacle. The Torah became the center of Jewish self-understanding as it always should have been. The priests once again served as an important balance of power alongside other ruling structures. Far from restoring the semblance of monarchy, these reforms continued divesting the Jewish people of the negative accretions introduced by the monarchy. City, temple, and priest adjusted to Torah—not king.

The post-exilic prophets were therefore not wrong in seeing these refortifications as providential acts of God. They were not wrong for rallying around their leaders and making a priority of their projects.[91] Ezra and Nehemiah were not selling out to Persia in restoring Jerusalem the way they did. Rather, they played a necessary part in God's two-pronged strategy for preparing his people for their future.[92] They are not the beginning of a trajectory running through Maccabeans, Bar Kochba, and the zealots. They are the continuation of the trajectory that originated in Isaiah, leads to Jesus, and later merges with the original diasporic scattering that began paving the way for the messianic missionaries. Neither the Nehemianic nor the Jeremianic route is more Jewish than the other. The former was an intentional throwback to palestinocentric existence and the latter was an intentional foretaste of the messianic mission. In light of the Spirit's work in Acts, it is hard not to see God's desire that the Nehemianic route would eventually be

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[91] However, the messianic language ascribed to Zerubbabel may have given some Jews the wrong impression (e.g., Hag 2:20-23; and Zech 4).

[92] For works that interpret Ezra and Nehemiah's projects is ways that strengthen and enhance Yoder's overall narration, cf. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah*, SBLMS 36 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); Andrew Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile*, 160-161; and Smith-Christopher, *Biblical Theology of Exile*, 137-162.

acclimated to the Jeremianic route. For this to happen is not the end of Jerusalem's salvific significance, but its fulfillment.

<div align="center">Ancillary Concern</div>

The book of Daniel makes several contributions to Yoder's narration.[93] It is particularly helpful to a canonical-directional approach because it addresses the last events in Old Testament history—the second-century Jewish struggle under Antiochus Epiphanes—and thus comprises the final scene in the Old Testament drama.[94] Daniel's contributions to Yoder's narration, which are too numerous to discuss here in depth, include the following: examples of radical Jewish faithfulness and nonresistance on foreign soil (Dan 1, 3, 6); vignettes of divine sovereignty over the nations (Dan 2, 4, 5); visions of God's kingdom coming from heaven by divine intervention [YHWH war], not human initiative [an Israelite king] (Dan 2, 7, 8, 11-12);[95] clarification that diasporic existence did not end after Cyrus's decree, but continues through the second century (Dan

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[93] Smith-Christopher makes considerable use of the book of Daniel, though primarily chs. 1-6, for the purpose of articulating a diasporic worldview. Cf. *Biblical Theology of Exile*, 163-188. Besides the book of Daniel, additional areas that would support and enrich Yoder's narration of this stage include (a) Ezekiel's ethic of trust in YHWH alone, emphasis on divine mobility and presence in diaspora, and balance of leadership powers in Israel (cf. Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile*, esp. 255-56); and (b) the Gedaliah movement in Jeremiah 40-41, which resists Jewish nationalism and appears to apply the Jeremianic commission (Jer 29:4-7) to life in Palestine (Jer 40:9-10). Albertz does not make the connection between these two texts, but offers insightful analysis of the Gedaliah movement (cf. *Israel in Exile*, 90-96).

[94] Paul M. Lederach's Daniel commentary does an exemplary job of both presenting the historical situation behind the book of Daniel and grappling with the ecclesial implications (*Daniel*, Believers Church Bible Commentary [Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994]). John Goldingay's excellent Daniel commentary is more technical in nature without neglecting the pivotal worldview issues, although he stops short of the concrete ecclesial reflections we find in Lederach's work (*Daniel*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 30 [Waco, TX: Word Publishing, 1989]).

[95] No human king ever reigns over Israel in Daniel's visions of restoration. The emphasis is on God's deliverance with no human help. In Daniel 2, the world's kingdoms are toppled by "a stone [that] was cut out, not by human hands" (vv. 34, 45). In Daniel 7, the "Ancient One" (v. 9) takes his throne, renders his judgment, and defeats the beasts. The kingdom is "given" over to "one like a human being" (v. 13), who is later identified with God's people (v. 28) who do nothing to win the battle or the throne. Daniel 8 emphasizes that the wicked kingdom "shall be broken, and not by human hands" (v. 25). Finally, in Daniel 11, the wicked ruler comes to ruin without Israel's help.

9); a subtle critique of the Maccabean project;[96] the depiction of international conflict between God and the nations, which is *not* Israel's responsibility to settle even though they are deeply impacted by it (Dan 7-12); and the conviction that God will raise from the dead those Jews who remained loyal and accepted the witness of martyrdom as God's role for them (Dan 11:32-35 and 12:1-13).

The worldview advocated here is strikingly similar to that which is presumed by Paul and taught throughout the New Testament. It is also remarkably consistent with the "not in charge" *Weltanshauung*, discussed in chapter 4, which Yoder claims that Jews since Jeremiah had to adopt.[97] This distinct social and theological posture does not therefore have to wait until the New Testament to find confirmation. It is the final word—chronologically speaking—of the Old Testament itself. Daniel thus provides Yoder's narration with a valuable historical, theological, and ecclesiological bridge to the New Testament.

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[96] The only possible reference is Daniel 11:34: "When they fall victim, they shall receive *a little help*, and many shall join them insincerely." This amounts to damning with faint praise.

[97] For convenience's sake, I repeat the list from chapter 4 here. (1) Since God is sovereign over world history, his people need not seize political sovereignty or subvert the sovereignty of others. (2) Since it is the task of the coming Messiah to establish a truly righteous social order among the nations, it is presumptuous if not blasphemous for God's people to take such matters into their own hands. (3) Since God chose not to bless the efforts of Maccabeans, Zealots, and Bar Kochba to restore national kingship, his people should avoid following their example. (4) Since God sometimes elects to punish his people for their sins using the sword of the nations, it is impious, not to mention futile, for them to interfere with that purpose. (5) Since God sometimes uses the suffering of his people to sanctify his name and balance the moral scales of history, it is inappropriate for them to avoid such suffering at all costs. (6) Since blood is sacred and belongs to God alone, and since blood-shedding denies human dignity, violates God's protection of his own image in the victim, and is the root social sin from which all structural evils evolved, God's people ought to avoid it altogether. (7) Since God has personally guaranteed Israel's survival, God's people must not take their survival into their own hands. (8) Since God is the one true God and thus God over all the nations and since God has scattered the Jews throughout various nations (crossing local, imperial, and continental lines), God's people must pursue mission without provincialism and cosmopolitan vision without empire. This list is a compilation from Yoder, "See How They Go," 190-91, and "Jesus the Jewish Pacifist," 73-75 and 82-84, in *JCSR*.

**Conclusion**

Since Yoder never set out to develop a comprehensive Old Testament narration, it is reasonable to expect that there would be significant gaps in his Old Testament work. In particular, Yoder has not provided an adequate account of the flood, the significance of Jacob's life, the role of land and priests in God's plan, an assessment of David's life, and the contributions of the book of Daniel. In addition, there are areas in which Yoder's interpretation needed to be revised, sometimes slightly, sometimes considerably. Such areas include primeval egalitarianism, the time of the judges and, especially, the refortification projects of Ezra and Nehemiah. Additional objections have been raised and may still be raised. I have not attempted to offer the definitive Old Testament narration, but to offer a strong narration that may aid ecclesiological reflection. Our evaluation has been guided by one primary question: Is Yoder's notion of a continuous trajectory of developing peoplehood from the Old Testament to the New based on a coherent and viable reading of the text? Based on the support that key components of Yoder's narration has received from Old Testament scholars and in light of the gaps that have been filled and revisions that have been made, I argue that the answer is yes. It now remains to determine what ecclesiological fruit this narration may bear.

CHAPTER 7: THE KINGSHIP OF YHWH AND PRIESTHOOD OF HIS PEOPLE

**Introduction**

If we were to discuss the Old Testament's contributions to ecclesiology from a chronological perspective, we might note that each phase of Israel's formation contributes a new element to the self-understanding of God's people.[1] The primeval history establishes the global context for ecclesiology. Abraham reveals God's ultimate strategy for global shalom. Torah codifies the means by which God shapes his people for global mission. Joshua and Judges depict the dependence of God's people upon his particular way of reigning over them. Monarchy showcases the most tempting and debilitating detours that God's people must avoid, whereas prophets, historians, and poets provide resources for stubborn resistance that sustain God's people amidst infidelity. Jeremiah reconfigures God's people for its transterritorial messianic mission, whereas Ezra and Nehemiah prepare Jerusalem for its unique role in that same mission. Finally, Daniel instills hope in God's battered people for ultimate vindication.

If Yoder's basic Old Testament narration is right, however, the Old Testament furnishes more than the chronicle of Israel's changing shape over time and more than the back story to Jesus' ministry and the Church's self-understanding. If Yoder is right, the Old Testament narrative culminates in a fundamental reconfiguration of God's people that constitutes the proper context within which ecclesiological reflection must be carried

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[1] For a summary of Yoder's Old Testament narration that is revised according to the suggestions of chapter 6, see Appendix A.

out. God's people are still a diasporic community, still God's means of waging peace, and still a people whose life together must be ordered so as to point the world to God's intentions for it.

From the multiple strands that constitute the Old Testament narrative emerges a unified ecclesial model: a priestly kingdom. This kingdom knows only one king, the God of Israel, and its identity is entirely derived from him. Standing in continuity with Israel's priests of old, this kingdom is composed of a plurality of cities with three defining attributes: they are cities of exile, cities of refuge, and cities on a hill. The transient nature of these cities points to their conviction that God alone is their portion and that they are not as attached to the places they live or cultures they inhabit as most native residents. As cities of refuge, and not judgment, they are excused from policing their host lands and are empowered to mediate God's peace to all the land's inhabitants. As cities on a hill, their life is ordered according to the king's decrees so that all the earth's inhabitants may catch a glimpse of the kingdom that is being extended to them. To abandon this priestly disposition or to compromise its key features is to make a fundamental shift in the strategic way God intends to use his chosen people in this world.

This final chapter summarizes the general ecclesiological gains of a canonical-directional reading of the Old Testament and then analyzes, more specifically, what a revised Yoderian narration teaches the Church about the kingship of YHWH and three defining attributes of his priestly people. This priestly kingdom framework encompasses neither all of the Old Testament's contributions to ecclesiology, nor all of the dimensions of priesthood that God's people embody. Rather, it captures several salient features that are raised by the revised Old Testament narration offered in this essay.

**The Contributions of a Canonical-Directional Approach to Ecclesiology**

Transcending Old Testament Neglect

Appropriating the Old Testament for ecclesiology is a daunting task that is beset by a host of challenges including widespread Old Testament illiteracy, the sheer volume of material, various historical question marks, a cacophony of interpretive streams, and the desire to respect the work of field specialists. Moreover, Ecclesiology is such a broad topic that one cannot simply focus on a single field of Old Testament study or relatively self-contained cluster of relevant books and still do justice to the Old Testament's major contributions. Doing so requires one to draw upon the full Old Testament narrative and, therefore, to cut across a myriad of intersecting fields of specialty. It would be presumptuous, especially if one is not an Old Testament scholar, to claim the requisite degree of expertise to achieve such a task. It is not surprising, then, that systematic thinkers often leave the Old Testament behind and create their ecclesiological systems out of New Testament, confessional, philosophical, pragmatic, and ecumenical cloth. If used at all, the Old Testament is mined for proof-texts to support ideas that are developed independently elsewhere.

Yoder did not think he was any different. He neither presumed to be an Old Testament scholar nor set out to develop an Old Testament theology or ecclesiology. Yet he refused to leave the Old Testament behind and chose to employ a biblical realist hermeneutic that takes the final form of the text seriously, within its canonical and redactional contexts, while bracketing as many unresolved historical and systematic issues as one may bracket without severely compromising the text's meaning. He combined this method with a stubborn insistence that every biblical passage, when

interpreted properly and within its context, contributes organically to the narrative trajectory that finds its fulfillment in Christ. I have dubbed this combination of methods a "canonical-directional" approach. Since each passage in context points of its own accord to the same Christ, it is not surprising that interpretive vignettes selected from various places throughout the Old Testament may be placed alongside one another to form a coherent directional reading that, despite various gaps, nonetheless transitions quite naturally into the New Testament work of Christ and mission of the Church. Consequently, over the course of his long and prolific career—one occasional essay at a time—Yoder carved out the building blocks of a coherent and stimulating Old Testament narration.

This method is not without flaws. The tendency to run roughshod over complex passages that are riddled with textual anomalies and the likelihood that this approach will remain at least one step behind the latest in biblical studies will render its conclusions suspect in the eyes of many specialists in the Old Testament guild. This is as it should be. Yoder's approach need not furnish the narrative to end all narratives. It recognizes a dialectical relationship between the narrow and detailed work that typifies biblical studies and the broad and systematic use that must be made of that work by theology and ethics. Biblical studies needs to keep correcting the inadequate generalizations of theologians, and cross-disciplinarian synthesizers must be willing to venture wide angle views that simultaneously evoke criticism, confirm fruitful trajectories, and expose areas requiring further work and wider exposure. Ecclesiology cannot wait for Bible scholars to settle on a guild-approved narration. At some point, risks must be taken and full canonical

narratives must be offered so the Old Testament does not remain in the shadows of serious ecclesiological, ethical, and other cross-disciplinary forms of reflection.

## Canonical-Directional Contributions

Yoder's canonical-directional approach yields considerable ecclesiological and potentially ecumenical fruit.[2] Its primary contribution may be illustrated in geometric terms. In geometry, a "ray" begins at a fixed point and extends in only one direction. For the purposes of this analogy, let us grant that the rays under examination are wide enough to encompass the diverse range of possible meanings contained within Scripture itself. The least disciplined form of ecclesiological reflection regards the New Testament as a fixed beginning point and then casts a ray from that point through a contemporary second point of its own choosing, whether a philosophical view, political posture, teaching of a particularly charismatic leader, or preferred constellation of ecclesial practices. Any historical, theological, or ecclesial developments that fall outside of that ray are deemed

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[2] In addition to the broad ecumenical promise of this approach, the Free Church tradition of which Yoder was a part stands to gain much from this kind of project. In recent years, Free Church scholars have recognized that their tradition is suffering something of an identity crisis. Miroslav Volf mourns the fact that it has assimilated some of the worst characteristics of modernity, including excessive individualism, privatization of faith, and commoditization of religion (*After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* [Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1998], 9-25). Curtis Freeman and a host of Baptist scholars have identified similar trends and have published a manifesto intended to cast a biblical Free Church vision of freedom over-against unrestrained human autonomy ("Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America," with Mikael Broadway, Barry Harvey, James Wm. McClendon, Jr., Elizabeth Newman, Philip Thompson, et al., *Baptists Today* 26 [June 1997]: 8-10). In dialogue with Catholic and Orthodox theology, Volf has suggested Trinitarian resources for centering and revitalizing Free Church ecclesiology. Freeman and others have drawn upon resources within the Baptist and Anabaptist heritages to do the same.

The canonical-directional appropriation of the Old Testament offered here has potential for grounding Free Church ecclesiology more solidly within Scripture. By beginning with the Old Testament and casting a full canonical trajectory, Free Church thinkers can utilize biblical criteria for evaluating the merits of various ecclesial developments in Christian history rather than looping around it and relying solely on a particular interpretation of the New Testament. Also, following the Old Testament narration offered here, Free Church thinkers might consider rooting the relative congregational autonomy it finds important, as well as the necessity of persons to choose faith, not in modern Western individualism but in the kingship of YHWH. This same emphasis on YHWH's reign might go a long way to correct the tendency of many evangelical churches to build congregational life around the vision of a single monarchical or CEO-type charismatic leader.

unfaithful aberrations. Though this kind of approach is prone to sectarianism and abuse, that result is not inevitable. Rather, its faithfulness is contingent upon choosing a viable second point that positions it for robust dialogue and cooperation with other views. The wrong second point, however, can engender infidelity and isolation.

In an effort to curb potential sectarian aberration, more disciplined ecclesiological thinkers have identified several fixed points within the mainstream of Christian history that are deemed faithful extensions of the work of Christ. Such points may be renowned thinkers like Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin; official statements or gatherings such as creeds, councils, and confessions; or apostolic succession following the line of Peter. This approach surpasses the prior approach since it necessarily restricts possible trajectories to well worn paths that have survived the test of time. Yet this approach, too, can breed sectarianism. Those who find themselves within a particular tradition— whether by birth, happenstance, choice, or providence—routinely evaluate ecclesial faithfulness according to criteria internal to their particular tradition. When thinkers from multiple traditions do this, a host of competing systems may result and the various traditions they represent may insulate themselves from the criticism and insight of others. Again, however, this outcome is not inevitable.

A third option, the one advocated in this essay, requires rethinking the notion of an ecclesiological starting "point." It begins by recognizing both the Old and New Testaments as relevant to ecclesiology. The inclusion of the Old Testament disabuses us of the notion that the starting point for ecclesiological reflection is punctiliar in nature.[3]

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[3] Of course, the New Testament itself is not punctiliar but constitutes a trajectory from the birth of Jesus to the work of the early Church, which moved beyond Jesus in some ways (e.g., incorporating the Gentiles). The notion of a ray beginning in the Old Testament also raises the question of where, exactly, that ray should begin. Following his canonical-directional approach, Yoder begins with the first book of the

Rather, Scripture presents a ray extending from the Old Testament, through the New Testament, and pointing beyond. This full canonical trajectory furnishes helpful criteria for evaluating particular ecclesial developments in Church history. It helps us evaluate which postcanonical developments stand in continuity with canon's direction as necessary evolutions and which developments do not, thereby constituting unwarranted devolutions or unfortunate detours. This is important from an ecclesiological perspective because Church history is not a straight line. It is a winding path that splits off into multiple trails that intertwine with one another and overlap at different points for varying lengths of time. Any given tradition may align with the canonical trajectory for a time and then depart from it at another time during which a different tradition might be more properly aligned. It is not likely that any ecclesial tradition will find itself in perfect harmony with this trajectory at all times.

An ecclesiological trajectory that takes into account the entire canon therefore provides valuable criteria for evaluating various ecclesiological opportunities and configurations that may present themselves to God's people. Since the Old Testament is shared by Christians of all traditions, it constitutes common ecumenical ground that can be discussed and debated, and upon which varying traditions might agree. Though it is inevitable that rival articulations of the Old Testament story will emerge with differing assumptions about the canonical trajectory, the resulting ecclesiologies will have more in common than those that begin only in the New Testament. Indeed, we have already seen in previous chapters that key components of Yoder's narration benefit from broad

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canon in a way that points to Christ. Since all things were created in, through, and for Christ (Col 1:16), the original prelapsarian order must have conformed to the way of Christ. The Fall was not therefore a fall merely from a generic notion of human perfection, but a fall from the perfect way of Christ. Yoder's trajectory therefore begins with the prelapsarian Christ, passes through the incarnate Christ, and finds ultimate fulfillment in the triumphant Christ.

ecumenical support. George Lindbeck is thus right in commending an "Israel-like view of the Church" as a promising path to ecumenical ecclesiology.[4] It remains now to sketch an Israel-like view of the Church that, taking the revised Yoderian narration as its point of departure, is founded upon YHWH's kingship and expressed in the priestly vocation of his subjects.

## The Church's Foundation: Kingship of YHWH

An ecclesiology that takes its bearings from Scripture must reckon with the impossibility of abstracting the Church's identity from its role as God's instrument in world history. Missional Church thinkers emphasize this by locating the Church within God's mission;[5] Yoder's narration does so by locating God's people under the kingship of YHWH, which amounts to the same thing but accentuates the narrative's political dimensions. This language has much to commend it from a New Testament standpoint since the indisputable center of Jesus' proclamation is God's kingdom. At a bare minimum, the centrality of God's reign means that the Church is not free to invent its calling or forge its own identity. It receives its identity from its king. Churches do not chart their own course in the world but ask where their king is leading and seek to keep step with his prior movement.

The kingship of YHWH also serves as our starting point because, as Yoder has taught us, our sociology cannot be separated from our theology. Who God is, what God is up to in this world, and how God seeks to accomplish his purposes has everything to do

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[4] Lindbeck, *Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. James J. Buckley, Radical Traditions (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 146-147.

[5] Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

with the shape his people must take. Yoder's narration teaches us at least five lessons about God's work in the world that ecclesiology must take seriously.

## God's Global Purview

The first lesson is that, from beginning to end, the canonical narrative presumes that the God of Israel and the Church operates on a global stage. Genesis 1-11 begins the canonical story by narrating the creation and development of human civilization. Though this development is fraught with ambivalence, predicated as it is upon violence and death, its scope is as wide as the entire human race. According to the flood account, *all* of humanity is entangled in wickedness, the degradation of *all* humanity brings God grief, *all* creation suffers a watery demise, and *all* of creation receives God's gracious postdiluvian covenant of peace.

This is crucial because the foundational event in the formation of God's people—the calling of Abraham—is presented precisely as God's response to his prior commitment not to destroy the earth again. In retiring his globally destructive bow, God commits to finding a less destructive means of accomplishing his will on earth. God's people have thus been set apart as his agents for this global task. Though God began small and local, his ultimate intention has always been global. This global scope is part of God's promise to bless all nations through Abraham's offspring.

Israel hardly experienced or even understood what its global call might mean. The Israelites could imagine becoming an important nation to which others stream for instruction and then return to their homelands with God's saving words, but it is not until the servant songs of Isaiah that they began catching God's ultimate vision and embracing the soteriological significance of a lowly, bruised, and scattered people. Only then do

they begin to envision how God might use them in a transterritorial, globally significant way. Though this was not Israel's only vision, it is the one Jesus confirms when he adopts the servant's posture, entrusts it to his followers, and sends them into all nations as salt and light.

## God's Strategy

A second lesson the Old Testament teaches us is that God intentionally selects and shapes a people that is unimpressive in the nations' eyes with regard to both power and posture. God calls his people out of power centers like Babylon and Egypt and places them in the hinterland of civilization where empires have not thrived. He likewise chooses individuals to carry his promise who consistently rank second (or lower) by typical human reckoning as exemplified in Israel's patriarchs, judges, and first two kings.

Jacob's journey from number two son to number one son and then back stands as a powerful witness to God's people's reluctance to embrace the lowly posture God ordains for them. Israel's attempt to become powerful and impressive like the nations recapitulates Jacob's misguided efforts on a grander scale. God's people struggle to comprehend that they are most powerful when God alone is the source of their strength. That changes, however, when Israel's kingship begins to collapse. The prospect of re-gaining the illusory power of monarchy seems bleak, and certain of the prophets begin to imagine the kind of life-giving witness a lowly and despised people might be to the nations. Jesus and his followers' unambiguous endorsement of this lowly servant posture is a powerful testimony that these prophetic hopes were not wishful thinking. The lowly

status of God's people is not a matter of happenstance; it is a matter of divine design and it is essential to the mission of God's people in all ages.[6]

## God's Timetable

The Old Testament has taught us that although God's work in this world entails a consistent trajectory toward a single *telos*, the shape of God's people necessarily changes along the way as God's plan reaches various transitional stages. Though his messianic mission would ultimately require a transterritorial and transethnic people, God's decision to form this people from one man and his wife necessarily meant that God's people would assume various forms along the way toward becoming this people. At one point, it meant being a slave nation so that multiplication could take place without complete dilution of identity. At a later point, it meant occupying a single territory protected by YHWH war so Israel could take on a singular Torah-formed identity. Still later it meant becoming a beaten down and exiled people because Israel's self-imposed monarchical detour introduced Torah-eclipsing elements that needed to be stripped away before God's intentions for his people could move forward.

Since God's plans are always going somewhere and because that somewhere often requires a partial shift in the shape of God's people, God's people must always ask: What time is it? Where are we now in God's global mission? What is God doing with us in this current stage so we may order our lives according to the demands of the present rather than the anachronistic forms of the past? Yoder's canonical-directional approach teaches us, however, that outdated forms are not automatically irrelevant. To the extent

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[6] This is not contradicted by God's choice, on occasion, to use a single individual with considerable power—like Joseph, Daniel, or Esther—to accomplish his purposes. A biblical ecclesiology should not be rooted in the fate of exceptional individuals who stand out in Scripture but in God's deliberate shaping of his people all throughout Scripture.

that past forms each participate in a consistent trajectory leading toward the present and culminating in a common *telos*, each divinely-approved form points to subsequent forms in important and instructive ways. Though residency in Egypt will not forever be required of God's people, the need to trust God alone for deliverance and for the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham is a staple of God's people's identity in every generation. Though residency in Palestine will not remain normative, the need for God's people to order their lives according to his design and to maintain a strong sense of distinction between themselves and others will typify God's people for all generations.

The challenge of God's people in every generation is to discern God's global mission in their place and time. Jesus' pronouncement that God's kingdom has drawn near is therefore critical to the Church's self-understanding. The advent of an era in world history in which there is neither male nor female, slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile (Gal 3:28) may not be reversed at the discretion of God's people. God's plans have moved forward: females have been elevated, slaves have been freed, and Gentiles have been incorporated. Though this profound shift has occurred, not every congregation in every place will manifest these implications in the same way or at the same pace. But no congregation that lives in God's time, which is a prerequisite for participation in God's mission, is free to set such implications aside.

## God's Way of Ruling

Israel learned the hard way that God is a jealous God. He will reign over his people his way. His exclusive reign was symbolized in the Garden of Eden by the presence of a forbidden tree. The question this tree continually posed was, Will God's people accept dependence upon God as their ultimate source of knowledge or will they

seek god-like knowledge for themselves, thereby cutting themselves off from divine

dependency? Unbeknownst to her, in partaking of that tree Eve set into motion the

domineering sort of rule that would both subordinate womankind and typify human rule

for all future generations. This was not God's design; it was the consequence of human

rebellion and the quest for autonomy.

In Torah, God addresses this imbalance of power. Since his people must represent

his reign throughout the world, God's reign—and not that of yet another power-wielding

human—must be made evident to the world. For organizational purposes, a certain level

of order was still required. God therefore organized his people into tribes and each tribe

into families and, among those tribes, he appointed leaders whose role was to serve the

interests of the people, offer guidance as necessary, and mediate God's will to all.

Though God's will was compatible with human leadership, it nonetheless required

sharing. Leadership must be dispersed throughout the people and not vested in an all-

compassing superstructure at the top of which reigns a single person. Only God could

stand alone atop any level of a leadership pyramid. He is neither the divine sanction for

autocratic rule nor a mere addendum to a power structure already topped by a human

figurehead. The level beneath him must always be occupied by many.

God therefore elected to rule over Israel through a plurality of leaders including

elders, priests, judges, and prophets. Though Moses occupied a unique place as head of

the migrating nation, it was essential that the people see him as God's mouthpiece and

that the Israelites not appoint a Moses-like successor once they secured the Promised

Land. Though Joshua led them across the river and into their predetermined territories, he

thereafter receded to the background of his own tribe as a leader among many whose

governing head is God alone. According to Scripture, the antithesis to divine rule is not anarchy (the absence of ruling structure) but monarchy (the presence of a rival ruler). God's response to the human propensity toward autonomy is thus a written law that transcends tribes and a plurality of rulers whose job it is to serve that law. Since God's people always follow some human ruler, God sees to it that no single ruler possesses all power and that a plurality of rulers would together point to his sole reign over all.

In embracing monarchy like the nations, the Israelites reversed this divine ruling. They thought a single head would bring order to the chaos resulting from their prior abandonment of God's covenantal reign. But it could not. After it collapsed, God reinstituted a balance of power among his people. In scattering them geographically, he forced them into situations demanding a plurality of elders. In reestablishing only some Jews in Jerusalem, he guarded the priesthood against aspiring to absolute sway. In placing Jewish governors under the thumb of foreign rule, he divested them altogether of their potential for totalizing power. Jesus took this movement one step further. Not only did he, as Messiah, submit to the Father's will in all things, but he proscribed all lording-over styles of leadership and exemplified a first-is-last, foot-washing form of leadership that alone is appropriate to God's reign. This work is completed by Christ's Spirit, which bestows diverse gifts upon the entire body, making each part valuable but none so prominent as to replace the body's single head, which is Christ.

<div align="center">God's Gracious Way with Humans</div>

Finally, the Old Testament teaches us that God does not control his people's every move, which would rob them of the freedom he gave them to eat of Eden's tree. Rather, he allows them to suffer the fruit of their self-injurious choices, as he did the first

humans, without abandoning them altogether. He graciously enters into genuine partnership with them by making their contributions, even their worst ones, count for something. He demonstrates his omnipotent sovereignty not by forcing humans to do his will but by graciously directing all human initiatives toward his saving purposes.

As Genesis 1-11 demonstrates, this has been so since the beginning. Though human sin violates God's egalitarian social dynamic, God uses domineering forms of human leadership to bring order to an otherwise chaotic and dangerous society. Though sin means death to humans and animals alike, God turns animal flesh into food and animal skin into clothing. Though humans grant unmitigated authority to sword-bearing dictators in exchange for the semblance of public safety, God uses tyrants and their swords to keep unbridled lawlessness partially contained. In commandeering domination, death, and dictatorship, God does not endorse them; he simply demonstrates that even they cannot thwart his reign as they can be made to serve his saving ends. On the other hand, God's judgment upon them is seen in their conspicuous absence from Edenic harmony, sacred Torah, prophetic hope, and the reign of Christ.

Primeval rebellion continued unabated among Abraham's descendants. It is repeated on a small scale in Israel's patriarchs, made evident in the wilderness wanderings, and ultimately institutionalized in Israel's monarchy. Still God does not abandon his people. His promise, presence, and purpose never leave the meandering patriarchs, wandering tribes, and apostate nation. In fact, God works with and through their worst mistakes. Though Abraham should have left his nephew in Haran, God protects Abraham as he rescues Lot from a coalition of raiding kings. Though the Israelites grumble over miraculous manna, God showers them with more quail than they

can manage. Though Israel chooses a king like the nations, God treats kings like sons and gives them every opportunity to succeed. At the end of the day, however, Lot's sons (Ammon and Moab) become perennial thorns in Israel's flesh, insatiable Israelites never fully secure the Promised Land, and nation-like monarchy collapses under the weight of its own inadequacies. That God works with these deviations and evokes the best of their limited potential does not constitute divine endorsement. They must still be evaluated according to the direction God takes his people as the narrative unfolds.

The same principle applies to Church history. The community of Christ remains a genuinely free partner in the divine plan and often makes terrible choices from a kingdom perspective. Still God does not abandon his Church. Instead, he graciously continues to work through its best and worst endeavors. God's enduring presence among his erring people does not render all ecclesial developments positive or even neutral, regardless of whether God has accomplished good through them. Nor does it mean that those ecclesial developments that have proven disastrous must be written off altogether as pure aberrations. An ecclesial humility is called for that recognizes God's work during the Church's darkest hours and nonetheless identifies as detrimental that which violates the canonical movement culminating in Christ.

### The Church's Vocation: Priesthood of YHWH's People

Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites (Exod 19:5-6).

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet 2:4-5).

> To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. (Rev 1:5-6; cf. 5:10 and 20:6).

The ecclesial metaphor "priestly kingdom" has deep canonical roots. It is one of the first blessings God pronounces over Israel when he claims them as his people in Exodus and one of the last words he leaves them with in Revelation. This image is also prevalent in Yoder's work. He titled one collection of his essays *Priestly Kingdom* and another *Royal Priesthood*.[7] In neither of these works does Yoder employ the threefold priestly schema utilized in this chapter, though he recognizes that this terminology captures well the manner "whereby the people of God in present history live from and toward the promise of the whole world's salvation."[8]

The three aspects of priesthood explored in this chapter are taken from the brief analysis of the priestly office in chapter 6. Our point of departure is that Israel's priests (a) lived as guests in the territory of other tribes, (b) settled in cities of refuge where they hosted murder suspects, and (c) dedicated themselves to the study and implementation of Torah. These three aspects only begin to scratch the surface of the priests' wide-ranging responsibilities among God's people. They do not address priestly leadership in sacrifices, festivals, tabernacle maintenance, and other forms of worship. Furthermore, our analysis sometimes pushes the significance of these three components further than their original significance in ancient Israel. To do so, however, pays no disrespect to the Levites of old. Indeed, each of the passages quoted above extends the meaning of

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[7] Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000); *Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998). Though Michael Cartwright was instrumental in editing and arranging the *Royal Priesthood* collection, Yoder himself suggested the title.

[8] Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 12.

priesthood beyond the more narrow historical function of Aaron's offspring. That said, our modest aim is to explore three priest-like characteristics that helpfully illuminate key contributions that Yoder's Old Testament narration makes to ecclesiology: cities of exile, cities of refuge, and cities on a hill.

## Cities of Exile

*Priestly Trajectory*

The ancestral head of the Israelite priesthood was Levi. We know nothing of this man's life save for one act of violence. Along with his brother Simeon, Levi went throughout the city of Shechem and slaughtered all the males who, at the time, were recovering from being circumcised in preparation for a merger with God's people (Gen 34). These brothers were avenging their sister Dinah who was raped by a Shechemite man. On account of this excessive retaliation, their father Jacob placed a curse upon their progeny, saying: "I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel" (Gen 49:5-7). For Simeon, this meant receiving territory within the tribe of Judah (Josh 19:9); for Levi it meant scattering throughout all of Israel's tribes, subsisting as aliens or exiles in the territory of others, and inheriting the Lord alone as their portion (Num 18:20).

God had once again taken the consequences of human sin and subsumed them under his providential purposes. Though Jacob meant Levi's scattering to be a curse, God transformed it according to his grace, saying to Levi's descendants, "I give your priesthood as a gift" (Num 18:7). Like the scattering of Babel's builders and the scattering of Jewish exiles, the scattering of Levi's descendants followed on the heels of human sin—only to be recognized in hindsight as God's gracious, underserved blessing. This scattering pattern continues in the New Testament. Before his ascension, Jesus told

his followers that after they receive power from on high, they must go and be his witnesses in Jerusalem, then *Judea and Samaria*, and then the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). That power came during the festival of Pentecost when thousands of Jewish pilgrims were baptized into Christ. These new converts did not, however, immediately go out in mission. Rather, they huddled in Jerusalem for a while. This huddling ended, however, in Acts 8:1 when a great persecution struck Jerusalem and "all except the Apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of *Judea and Samaria*." Thus began the next stage in the Gospel's advance. Though the Christians did not immediately consider this persecution to be a blessing, God used it to launch his global mission. That this scattering took hold is evident in the salutations beginning the letters of James ("To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion," 1:1) and 1 Peter ("To the exiles of the Dispersion," 1:1).

As exiles in the Promised Land, the priests became a sign of the future "landlessness" of Israel and then the Church. If our revision of Yoder's narration is correct, this was God's intention. After equipping his people on Palestinian soil, God planned to send them out into the world as exiles in order that they might point others to God's reign, wherever they might end up residing. The Jeremianic commission showed what that might look like in Babylon, the refortification of Ezra and Nehemiah made provisions for exilic presence in Palestine, and the servant songs of Isaiah anticipated infiltration into all nations. By the time the kingdom came in Jesus, God's people had, by and large, made the sociological and theological adjustments necessarily for long term exilic existence.

*God Owns—Others Rule—God's People Serve*

The Israelites learned, however, that exile was not simply a matter of geography. It was a statement of faith that all lands everywhere belong to Israel's God and that, even when they live in the Promised Land, God's people are aliens and tenants on divine turf (Lev 25:23). The Babylonian exile did not fundamentally change this. It was God's land before exile and God's land after exile. What changed is middle management. Under Torah, middle management belonged to a plurality of leaders among Israel's tribes. For a while, God's people entrusted that power into the hands of a king. From exile forward, management belonged to the nations, and the Israelites had to permanently adjust to this. The land would still have a human ruler, but that ruler would not be one of God's people. Someone else would determine what laws would be binding on all the land's inhabitants. Someone else would protect the borders from foreign invasion.  Someone else would oversee the broad-ranging economic issues impacting the entire region. God's people now, like God's people of old, must demonstrate radical trust that divine oversight of his chosen middle managers is sufficient to provide the basic needs of God's people and of the nations in which they live.

Exilic living thus requires God's people to adopt a servant posture wherever they live. Since God owns the land and has given it to others to manage, God's people are recused from holding the scepter. Like Israel's priests who were free to study Torah, welcome convicts, tend the tabernacle, and facilitate the wider public's worship and instruction, now all of God's people are freed from running the world so that they may serve the world with the life-giving resources only they possess. Yoder illustrates this principle well, saying, "The Christian who wants to put the role of Christian living into

second place in order to serve the state as a first priority is like a musician who leaves the

stage in order to work as an usher in the concert hall. Of course the usher is also

necessary; but the musician cannot be replaced in his or her role. And musicians, of all

people, should know that they are of most value when they perform the role that no one

else can fill. If the musician is not on stage, and there is therefore no concert, then the

usher's role has no meaning either."[9]

The Church's servant's posture is therefore neither a curse nor a demotion, but an

honor. It is the kind of posture God's strategy in this world has always required. It is why

he called his people out of Babylon and Egypt rather than confiscate and wield their

domineering imperial resources. It is why Torah made no provisions for a powerful

international military and political presence. It is why monarchy failed, dispersion

followed, and refortification remained modest. It is why God sent the messiah to a poor

family from a small town rather than a rich family in a booming metropolis. It is why that

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[9] Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 44-45. Yoder does not say this in order to legalistically blacklist certain professions in advance as never being appropriate for Christians. Yoder's discussion of vocation is more nuanced than that. He argues, for instance, that believers should avoid asking "Could a Christian be a lawyer?" and should ask, instead, "Are the things a lawyer does in modern America the things a person who proposed to follow Jesus might do?" (Thomas L. Shaffer, *Moral Memoranda from John Howard Yoder: Conversations on Law, Ethics, and the Church between a Mennonite Theologian and a Hoosier Lawyer* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002], v; and *Christian Witness to the State* [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998], 56-57). This sort of question keeps the servant way of Christ central to the issue of vocation without denying the possibility that creative responses to this question may lead followers of Christ to choose a particular vocation in one time and place that under other circumstances would be entirely inappropriate. Yoder articulates this delicate balance, saying, "Neither the position of conscientious objection nor that of conscientious involvement can be adequate if taken as a sweeping recipe. Only the insistence that both are open options, needing to be chosen situationally, can permit either to have integrity. Otherwise, the refusal becomes irresponsible or the responsibility becomes unfaithful" (Karl Barth and the Problem of War and Other Essays on Barth [Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2003], 159). Additional works in which Yoder engages vocation include *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources Press, 1992), 25-27 and 52-53; *Christian Witness to the State*, 20, 27-28, 56-57, and 88; *Discipleship as Political Responsibility* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 45; *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 184-186 and 233-235; *Fullness of Christ: Paul's Vision of Universal Ministry* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1987), 39-40; "I Choose Vocation," *Mennonite Community* 2 (Oct 1948): 6-7; Karl Barth and the Problem of War, 158-159 and 165-166; *Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), 118-121; *Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 8-9; *Priestly Kingdom*, 83, 109-110, 138-139, 162, and 210; and *Royal Priesthood*, 56-64, 80-82, 94-95, 113-114, and 117.

messiah gathered an unimpressive cadre of followers and taught them that they are not sent into the world to lord over it, but to serve. The servant posture appears weak but should not be confused with weakness. It is the strength of the divine king working through his people to transform human history. It is the power operative in Jesus, the apostles, and the early Church. Though the world does not recognize its potency, God's people dare not deny its truth, relevance, and ultimate triumph.

*Concrete Ecclesial Implications*

Exilic living also means a particular way of living in the land, which may be characterized as "living lightly." Such light living manifests itself in at least five ways in the Old Testament that are relevant to ecclesiological reflection.

(1) Light living requires God's people to remain flexibly adaptive to where God's Spirit may lead them. For the Levites, living lightly meant a perpetual readiness to pack the Lord's tent and relocate in a moment's notice. In Ezekiel's day, it meant moving to Babylon where God's mobile presence would be with his people. For Jesus and his followers, it meant having no place to lay their heads. Exilic living does not mean the absence of sturdy shelters, viable vocation, long-range planning, or genuine community impact. Jeremiah's exilic commission involved building houses and living in them, planting gardens and enjoying their fruit, securing spouses and seeking the welfare of the cities in which they lived (Jer 29:4-7). Living as exiles thus means that God's people must be fully present and faithfully engaged with both the land and its residents wherever they live. They must do so, however, as a people whose identity and livelihood are not bound solely to a particular geographic locale or national allegiance. They have a transterritorial king whose global mission supersedes all else.

For specific congregations this might mean not binding themselves to buildings and financial institutions in ways that restrict their ability to relocate on short notice to a different place where God may lead them. It might mean cultivating a willingness in members to move to different neighborhoods in order to increase the congregation's ministry and witness there. It might mean some members moving closer to the geographic center of congregational life so excessive distance would no longer obstruct intimate involvement in body life. For others it might entail relocating far away to plant new congregations or to join overseas evangelism. In extreme cases of persecution, it might require scattering abroad or moving underground rather than joining a violent uprising at the expense of their witness.

(2) Light living requires God's people to hold lightly to possessions. For the ancient Israelites, divine ownership of the land meant that crops growing on the edges of their fields belonged to the poor, first fruits of all produce belonged to God, and all territorial expansion would eventually revert the land's original "owners." The Apostle Paul describes what this meant for Corinthian believers who were not necessarily called to itinerant ministry or geographic relocation: "The appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away" (1 Corinthians 7:29-31).

Exilic living therefore comes with a distinct economic vision that is rooted in the conviction that the resources of all lands belong to God. Though the land's typical

inhabitants seek unlimited expansion of their family or tribe's domain, God's people are more concerned that their daily needs are met and that their excess may be distributed to those struggling to get by. Exilic mission therefore means living modestly, giving cheerfully, and sharing generously. It means both corporately and individually that God's people resist accumulating that which they are not willing to give away, share, or leave behind as God calls them forth in mission.

(3) Living lightly requires God's people to sit loose on future dreams. The Old Testament teaches that God does not reveal to his people all facets of his plans for them. He gives them enough information to faithfully carry out what he requires of them in the moment. For God's people, it has meant wandering nomadically, centuries of slavery, marching around cities, embracing Babylonian captivity, accepting Persian charity, following a lowly king around Palestine and, eventually, going forth living lightly as God's servants to the nations. God's people cannot predict where his Spirit might lead them next, and so they must cultivate a posture of maximum flexibility and a spirit of provisionality toward all future plans. James impresses this principle upon the dispersed tribes to which he addressed his letter, saying, "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.' Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil" (James 4:13-16).

The Old Testament teaches that diasporic provisionality was no mere accident of first century happenstance. It may not be sloughed off once Christians elicit Roman

imperial favor and the stability it offers. It has been a constitutive part of Israel's

sociopolitical DNA in practice since Jeremiah and in principle since Abraham. Churches

and their members must therefore cultivate the linguistic habits to reinforce this reality,

the structural facility to receive the Spirit's guidance, and the disciplinary capacity to

exhort one another to resist the prevailing culture's rival autonomous impulses.

(4) Living lightly requires God's people to walk cautiously within their host

cultures. If Yoder is right about the descendants of Cain, human culture is not a neutral

matrix within which humans subsist but a deeply ambivalent project predicated upon

human sin and violence. Yet humans cannot live without culture and are dependent upon

it in countless ways. God therefore worked through fallen culture and sought to channel

its most destructive elements toward humanity's good. Despite these efforts, the first

human culture culminated in pervasive evil and God subsequently washed it away in the

flood. Having resolved not to do so again, God committed to working some other way

with the cultures of this world. His strategy in Abraham was not to abolish, rule over, or

even transform all the world's cultures. Rather, with Abraham's descendants, God

pioneered a new culture, an alternative to the ambivalent cultures of this world in order

that it might shine as a light to them. This strategy is discussed below in the section

"Cities on a Hill." Suffice it to say now that being exiles in this world also means a

nomadic posture toward its competing cultures.

Living lightly in culture has always been hard for God's people. At their worst,

they embrace the prevailing culture with all of its ambivalent trappings and drift into

apostasy. More benevolently, they engineer various transformations of culture by

usurping its control mechanisms and seeking to use them for good. In both cases, God's

people underestimate culture's ambivalence and corrupting power and are deeply misshaped by it. God's strategy, however, is not to ignore fallen culture. He has scattered his people throughout all cultures as witnesses to the life-giving culture of his kingdom. To many Jews in Babylon, it was obvious that they did not belong to Babylonian culture. They went out of their way to stand out and apart from it (Dan 1). This is not so obvious to Christians in the western world today, and their confusion has diluted the providential power of exilic peoplehood.

(5) Lastly, living lightly requires God's people to forsake all aspirations of lording over the lands in which they live. It would have been unthinkable to Israel's priests to deduce from the fact that they knew Torah better than the elders, judges, and prophets of their host tribes, that they should take responsibility for ruling over those tribes. On the contrary, they could make indispensible contributions to their tribes precisely because they were not responsible for ruling over the land's inhabitants with the day-to-day duties that entailed. They likely could have done much good with positions of power, but their purpose was to serve.

Jeremiah let Babylon rule, Ezra let Persia rule, Daniel let Greece rule, and the early Church let Rome rule. This "live and let rule" posture, which permeates all of Scripture, has been difficult for Christians to assume and maintain. The numerical advantage that Christians have enjoyed in certain places during certain times has translated into an unbiblical notion of responsibility. In the divine algebra, possessing the numbers, freedom, and power to rule over the masses does not add up to a commission to do so. With God in Israel's camp, Pharaoh on his knees, and the population reported in Numbers, there is no reason that the Israelites could not have taken full control of

Egypt.[10] Yet this was never God's strategy for his people and a change in historical circumstances does not negate this fact. If the Old Testament is deemed relevant to ecclesiology, then Christians in all lands today ought to rethink any aspirations for top-down societal influence. When it comes to the Church's posture, servanthood is not a style of ruling over the world but an alternative to such rule.

<div align="center">Cities of Refuge</div>

*Priestly Trajectory*

The ancient Israelites set apart six towns in Palestine to serve as cities of refuge (Num 35:9-28). A person who accidentally killed someone was encouraged to flee to such cities lest the avenger—a relative with the right to take life for life—prematurely execute vengeance upon an innocent slayer. The Levites, who had no territorial allotment, were settled into forty-eight cities, six of which were designated cities of refuge (Num 35:6-7). Their responsibility was to provide a safe haven for the accused until a proper trial could be conducted (Josh 20:4-5). If a guilty verdict was reached, the priests were to extradite the slayer to the townspeople for execution. If the townspeople dragged their feet, the slayer was to be released upon the death of the high priest (Num 35:28). The priests played no part in the slayer's trial or execution.

The reasons priests were selected for this intermediary function are not articulated in Scripture. It is reasonable to surmise, however, that they were deemed uniquely qualified to render impartial hospitality because they were uninvolved in various forms of tribal management that might give them a vested interest in bringing suspected criminals

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[10] It is worth noting, however, that the large numbers reported here are widely contested by scholars. For a helpful introduction to the conversation, cf. Eryl W. Davies, "A Mathematical Conundrum: The Problem of the Large Numbers in Numbers I and XXVI," *Vetus Testamentum* 45, no. 4 (Oct 1995): 449-469.

to premature justice.[11] They did not run the tribe, judge its cases, or execute its criminals. Compared with native tribe members, they had little stake in tribal politics and criminal justice. This enabled them to care for those whom others might fear or shun. Their relative disentanglement from ordinary civil structures positioned them perfectly to mediate peace.

*God Judges—Others Execute—God's People Mediate*

The unique role of priests within Israel was much like Israel's role among the nations. After clearing the Canaanites out of the Promised Land, the Israelites were given no responsibility for executing judgment throughout the world.[12] Though they firmly believed that God had a vested interest in judging and punishing the nations (e.g., Ps 59, 67, 82, 96), they did not claim a share for themselves. Their role was to bless, not to judge. Should the nations ever stream to Zion for instruction, then *God* would arbitrate between them, broker a lasting peace, and transform their weapons of war into farming equipment.

The nature of Israel's hands-off posture toward international judgment is seen most clearly in Isaiah 45-49. These chapters furnish a helpful glimpse into the divinely ordained division of responsibilities. God had two tasks that needed to be accomplished: partially restore Israel by defeating Babylon and mediate his salvation to the nations. In

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[11] There are cases, however, over which priests were expected to preside. When someone was killed in the open country and nearby townspeople had no idea who the slayer was, the case was brought before the priests who settled the matter by leading the elders of the closest town through a process of absolution. Cases like these only underscore the notion that priestly independence from ordinary tribal politics enabled them to broker peace and grant pardon in ways that transcend the tribes' capacities.

[12] If Yoder is right, however, the role of the Israelites in the cleansing of Canaan was not that of judge but of priest. In devoting Canaanite cities to destruction—to be consumed as a whole burnt offering—God entrusts to his people a ritual act of sacrifice, not the responsibility to judge and execute.

chapters 45-48, we see that God appoints Cyrus, the Persian prince, to be his instrument of justice. Cyrus would bring the Babylonian empire to a decisive end as well as sponsor the partial restoration of Jerusalem. Though Cyrus neither acknowledges Israel's God nor recognizes the significance of the service he was rendering (Isa 45:4-5), God nonetheless directs Cyrus' imperial ambitions toward God's own purposes.[13] The more significant task, however, belonged to Abraham's descendants. Israel, not Cyrus, is identified as God's chosen servant. Though the weak and battered Israelites are incapable of rescuing their own people from the clutches of Babylon, God chooses lowly and despised Israel to be his light to the nations and mediator of global salvation (Isa 49:5-6). Thus, the same characteristics that made the Israelites suitable intercessors rendered them unfit vessels for judging.

This basic division of responsibilities is confirmed not only by Jesus' hands-off approach to institutions of judgment, but also by Paul's instructions to Christians in Rome. Using priestly language, Paul instructs believers to offer their bodies as living sacrifices that are holy and pleasing to God. To do so, they must not conform to this world but be transformed by the renewing of their minds (Rom 12:1-3). According to Paul, this renewal entailed a distinct way of dealing with enmity, which included the following elements: extending hospitality to strangers, blessing and not cursing those who persecuted them, living in harmony with others, associating with the lowly, not repaying evil with evil, living peaceably with all, never avenging themselves, leaving

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[13] Isaiah 45:4-5 serves to correct simplistic readings of Cyrus' edict in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23. That this edict names Israel's God and claims that Cyrus is operating at YHWH's behest should not be over-interpreted. This edict is likely little more than a form letter that was customized as needed to address each distinct people group. Isaiah reminds us that Cyrus did not truly know Israel's God any more than the other gods he likely appealed to when rallying support from other imperial vassals.

vengeance to God, and supplying their enemies' needs so as to overcome evil with good (Rom 12:13-21).

It did not likely cross the minds of the early Christians that society would fall apart if they did not accept responsibility for judging wrongdoers. This is not simply because they constituted but a small segment of society. More importantly it was because they, like the young David, believed that vengeance belonged to God.[14] They fully trusted that God had other ways of punishing evil and that he would do so without their help. This is evident in the next pericope of Paul's letter. In Romans 13, Paul specifies that God uses governing authorities to execute judgment on wrongdoing. Christians could devote themselves to mediating God's peace to the wicked because God uses others to keep wickedness in check. Though the imperial sword could keep evil from wreaking too much havoc on wider society, only the costly love of Christ could permanently overcome such evil and only Christians were committed to such love.

*Concrete Ecclesial Implications*

Since hanging his bow in Noah's day, God has been waging peace against all enmity in this world and his people have occupied important diplomatic posts in this "war." Though the Israelite monarchy forestalled this process in many ways, God eventually retired Israel's bow, too. The collapse of the kingship and the scattering of God's people to "seek the shalom" of foreign cities (Jer 29:7) signaled the beginning of a new phase in Israel's mediatory vocation. This phase culminated in the life, death,

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[14] As David grew older and gained more power, he left this principle behind. One wonders if his claiming of Goliath's sword (1 Sam 21:9) after refusing Saul's sword as a youth (1 Sam 17:39) is intended as an editorial clue that a transformation is beginning to take place in David's disposition toward vengeance. Like Gollum's ring, Goliath's sword does not immediately take hold of David, but before long it pervades his reign and seals his demise.

resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. In Jesus, God won the decisive battle in this war, but it remains for God's people to publicize the terms of his peace. The Apostle Paul describes the Church's role in this process as follows: "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us" (2 Cor 5:19-20). In the Old Testament they were called cities of refuge; Paul might call them embassies of reconciliation. Whatever we call them, Israel's intercessory vocation manifests itself in at least four ways that are relevant to ecclesiology.

(1) Mediation requires risky hospitality. Though priests stood out for harboring potential felons, God called all Israelites to risky hospitality—a hospitality that extended not only to the poor in their land, but also to the alien. Leviticus 19:33-34 reads, "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." People who appreciate the power of exile must also appreciate the needs of fellow exiles. To be half-at-home in one's own land should not lead to defensiveness but to risky generosity. Aliens not only look different but they bring different customs, back stories, and dreams. These differences are no threat to those who mediate divine peace. As former and future aliens, those Israelites with land worth sharing were called to be safe havens for aliens in Palestine. Being a wanderer is no excuse for hoarding what one has. First century Christians remembered Abraham, the wandering Aramean, as an exemplary model of exilic hospitality (Heb 13:2; cf. Gen 18:1-8).

Though risky hospitality is rare in cultures dominated by fear, congregations committed to mediating God's peace must create space not only for the socially acceptable and morally respectable but also for those who are tangled in sin and socially uncouth. Christians must create space in their corporate and individual lives for those who are other and whose otherness is a threat to our identity and security. Welcoming such exiles onto our turf means more than sharing a pew and restraining the tendency to drive strangers away by the repulsion of our discomfort. It means sharing a meal and welcoming others into our homes for genuine fellowship. It means opening the guest room to believers who struggle to make ends meet. Congregations committed to mediating divine peace need to revive the ancient practice of risky hospitality, especially in a culture of fear.

(2) Mediation requires respectful disentanglement. Israel's priests could welcome the suspect stranger at least partly because they had little to do with Israel's structures of judicial discernment and criminal prosecution. Yet such noninvolvement did not entail disrespect toward those structures. The priests did not look down upon fellow Israelites whose responsibilities were sometimes death-dealing rather than peace-waging. In God's economy, both had a place. Unlike the Israelites in Palestine, however, Christians live on the other side of the providential dispersion and unilateral disarmament of God's people.[15] All disciples are free, like priests, from tending to judicial and lethal affairs. This freedom from such responsibilities is not a license to passivity; it entails bondage to

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[15] The prophet Zechariah anticipates such disarmament in ways highly suggestive of the work of Christ, a fact that was not lost upon the early Church (cf. Matt 21:5): "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. *He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations*; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth" (Zech 9:9-10).

proactive intercession. Christians have been outfitted with and for the gospel of peace (Eph 6:10-17). To use our freedom in order to indulge our selfish pleasures or to look down on others as if from a point of moral superiority is to forget the purpose of our freedom. God has a mission for which total commitment is required and undiluted grace and mercy are indispensible. Because God's peace offer is for the deeply depraved, the judicial scowl and executive rebuke are out of place. Sympathy and forgiveness must override judgment and prosecution so that sinners may hear a gospel of grace.

Respectful disentanglement is thus imperative for Christian witness. It is respectful because Christians must recognize that this world's agents of judgment and prosecution are ordered by God himself to carry out his purposes. As fallen powers, they abuse their authority, but God uses them nonetheless and his people must accept the reality of their subjection to them (Rom 13:1-7 and 1 Pet 2:13-17). Christian witness is disentangled from sword-bearing powers for multiple reasons, but foremost among them is the fact that this world's weapons are unfit for the battle Christians are fighting (2 Cor 10:3-6 and Eph 6:10-17). Coercive power may change practice, but it cannot change hearts. Coercive power may constrain evil, but it cannot overcome it. Only the love of Christ truly overcomes evil, and sinners seldom perceive Christian love when they see human swords.

(3) Mediation requires rigorous preparation. The Levites had to learn to accept the slayer. They had to learn to replace fear for personal safety with trust in God. They had to learn to suspend judgment and to see the fugitive as a fellow Israelite and not the embodiment of a single potential offense. Levitical hospitality was learned over a lifetime of studying Torah, breaking bread with elders in the faith, and building friendships with

guests who are haunted by their past. Such intentional formation is no less important for Gospel mediators.

Christians learn to mediate God's peace in a variety of ways, the first of which involves accepting the gift of peace that God has given them. God's people are not simply those who extend peace to others, but those to whom God's peace has been extended by another. The capacity to wage genuine peace is often learned in-house. If Christians cannot show God's love to one another—a friendly situation in which both sides agree to the necessity of peace—then they have no credible peace to offer others (1 Cor 6:1-8). Indeed, the Eden account teaches that the loss of peace with God cannot be separated from a loss of peace with one another and with God's good creation.

Furthermore, the Apostle Paul reminds Christians that the cross of Christ had profound social implications, "In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us…that he might create in himself one new humanity in the place of the two, thus making peace" (Eph 2:13-14). If this new humanity is to mediate the peace upon which it was founded and to which it is called, believers must confess their sins to one another, forgive one another, and reform all spiteful thinking and speaking habits toward those who have caused them pain.

Waging in-house peace is only the beginning. It extends next to close enemies who are not of the faith. Those who cannot mediate God's love to familiar enemies, whether a condescending co-worker or an estranged relative, are ill-equipped to intercede on behalf of the threatening stranger. Such everyday enemies are often the primary

battleground for reconciliation. Though mediating God's peace does not stop there,

preparing for it means learning to love those who pose a threat to one's host nation,

biological family, or income source. A sense of shared enmity is extremely unifying,

since hatred is a potent social adhesive. For this reason, divinely-appointed mediators

must resist. Having been disentangled from structures of judgment and prosecution,

Christians are uniquely positioned to extend grace and mercy to those who have

experienced great hostility from wider society. Since there is no shortage of those willing

to wage war on their enemies, God has set his people apart as much-needed cities of

refuge.

(4) Mediation requires robust faith. Priests had to trust that God's system for

dealing with Israel's offenders was in the best interests of his people. Ancient Israelites

had to trust that God would humble Pharaoh, subdue Canaan, dismantle Babylon, and

topple Greece, all with little to no help from them.[16] First century Christians had to trust

that the sword-backed empire would execute the degree of divine vengeance necessary to

keep relative peace in society so that believers could go about loving their enemies,

praying for their persecutors, and mediating God's peace to the type of people Rome

would rather crucify. Throughout Scripture, God's people had to trust that their

seemingly irresponsible contribution to world peace was indeed the future of world

peace. They had to trust that God would meet all needs that fall beyond the purview of

their commission some other way.

Ecclesial faith is not primarily demonstrated in the tasks that the Church leaves

for others to do; it is demonstrated in the confidence it places in the power of the cross

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[16] Interestingly the subjugation of Canaan, the only event in this list that required Israel's participation, was least successful (Judg 1:19-36).

and the transformational work that it alone can do. It is demonstrated in proactive

ministries of reconciliation that take the peace of Christ to the conflict rather than wait

out the conflict on the sidelines. It is demonstrated in the patience required to present

God's peace and justice as gifts to be received rather than force them upon others who are

reluctant to accept. If congregations are to be cities of refuge, they will not therefore

pressure their guests to make commitments they are not ready for or changes they do not

appreciate. When guests see the peace of Christ powerfully at work in the Church's

midst, God's Spirit arouses in them the right motives to commit and to change.

Congregations are not cities of refuge because God makes no demands in and through

them; they are cities of refuge because they honor the freedom God grants the world to

reject their priestly mediation.

## Cities on a Hill

*Priestly Trajectory*

As Moses concludes his farewell address in Deuteronomy, he takes time to

appoint his successors. Rather than select a single functionary like himself both to lead

and to teach God's people, he appoints Joshua to finish the trek into the Promised Land

and he appoints priests to instruct the Israelites in Torah (Deut 31:7-9 and 33:8-10). This

priestly instruction is critical because God intended to bless the nations through the

Torah-formed life of his people. Should the Israelites order their lives accordingly, God

would bless them generously and the nations would be drawn to God through them.

Moses prefaces his giving of the law with this very promise:

> See, just as the LORD my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and
> ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy.
> You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and

discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? (Deut 4:5-8)

After David established Jerusalem on Mount Zion as the nation's capital city and the place of God's dwelling, the notion of a "city on a hill" took on great meaning for God's people. The prophets in particular envisioned the fulfillment of Israel's global mission in terms of the nations streaming to Jerusalem for peace, justice, and Torah instruction (Mic 4:1-2; Jer 3:17; and Zech 8:22-23). With the destruction of Jerusalem, however, and the preliminary dispersion of God's people for mission, it appeared that these prophecies would lose their eschatological significance. Though God partially restored Jerusalem so the messianic mission may start from there, the dream of a hilltop city began to fade.

Jesus did not, however, forsake this long-cherished image. As he delivered his Sermon on the Mount, which extended the abiding relevance of Torah for the witness of God's people, he recontextualized the city on a hill metaphor for its new messianic context: "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:13-16). Rather than abandon the notion of a shining city, Jesus coupled it with the image of salt. His people would scatter like salt throughout the earth, and wherever they landed they would shine like cities on a

hill. The messianic mission would not revolve around one central city, but multiple scattered cities. This is consistent with the creation mandate to multiply and fill the earth. Paul takes it in cosmic directions by comparing God's people to stars that shine throughout the universe (Phil 2:15).

The point of these diverse metaphors is the same: the core witness of all God's people, not just the Levites, is the shalomic way of life that God had entrusted to them. Israel and the Church's witness revolves around neither lack of permanent palestinocentrism nor lack of responsibility for ruling the world and executing its justice; it revolves around divinely ordained abundant life in harmony with the Creator and all creation. Though excessive entanglement and stubborn residency could obstruct that core mission, that mission is not solely defined by the absence of such things. Likewise, if Israel's priests lived as exiles, harbored fugitives, and offered continual sacrifices, but failed to teach Torah, the life and mission of Israel would fall apart. This is exactly what happened in Israel's history.[17]

*God Orders, Others Maintain, God's People Witness*

God not only owns all lands and judges all people, but he also assumes responsibility for the organization of everyday life. God does not, however, micromanage his creation. To do so would, perhaps, overwhelm humans and squelch the genuine freedom God elected to honor. Instead, as discussed in chapter 3, God created a superstructure of powers and principalities by which he orders all earthy affairs. In distinction from the sword-backed governing structures noted above, these powers are not necessarily predicated upon human sin. Such orders would have been necessary before

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[17] Cf. 2 Chron 15:3-6 and Jer 2:8.

the Fall and, hypothetically speaking, could have developed in an entirely benevolent way so as only to serve the good of humanity. Of course, that did not happen. Sin deeply impacted the powers. They routinely use their authority on loan from God to serve their own interests rather than the interests of those placed in their charge. Such authority-bearers, which permeate human society from top to bottom, include angels, kings, governors, public officials, utility providers, institutional administrators, landlords, parents, teachers, babysitters, and so forth. The world cannot function without such functionaries and God's people are no exception.

Had these powers not fallen, it is not clear how God would have used them. Perhaps he would have used them to create the ideal society. Perhaps they would have been his instruments of sustaining the shalomic harmony he intends for all creation. This is not, however, how they function. Due to sin, they function in erratic and unpredictable ways, sometimes serving, sometimes domineering, sometimes blessing, and sometimes cursing. In their current state, they are incapable of ushering in God's kingdom; they only perpetuate familiar patterns of human reign. As a result, God uses them for more limited purposes. The self-interest that permeates their core ideally suits them for balancing out the self-interested egos of other powers. Though God can use such self-interest to maintain a basic level of order in the world, he cannot use it to usher in a genuinely new order. Orders rooted in self-interest will only beget self-interested orders.

If God is to usher in a kingdom of other-directed shalomic harmony, a different order of power is necessary. God's people were formed to serve that order. As sinners in their own right, whose lives are deeply entrenched in the old order, they can in no way imagine, engineer, or otherwise inaugurate the new order. God himself would have to do

that and his people must serve some other purpose. That other purpose is to be a sign to the world that the old order will not endure and that God's new order will supplant it. To be a sign of God's order, his people must learn that order, arrange their lives by that order, and extend to others God's invitation to that order. Their perfect adherence to God's order is neither necessary nor possible, though some semblance is required for the sign to achieve its intended effect. As long as God's people continue to initiate others into that order, these initiates will continually bring the old order with them. God's people will thus never arrive at perfection without the kind of dramatic divine intervention anticipated in Daniel and Revelation.

In sum, God is sovereign over the everyday life of his creation. Sin has so distorted creation and its orders that the intended shalomic harmony was effectively fractured. Lest God's creatures devour one another in their sinfulness, God uses his fallen created orders to maintain a tolerable degree of order throughout the earth. In God's hands, this order is stable enough to provide for humanity's basic needs, but it is not capable of creating the shalomic harmony he intends. God has other plans for restoring his fallen creation and ushering in a new harmonic order: the kingdom of God.

Since Abraham, God has been forming a people for himself who will inherit God's kingdom. Until that day, however, they live as servants of this order. Their role is not to maintain the old fallen order but to bear witness to God's new impending order. When God's people order their lives according to God's reign, they serve as God's foretaste, first fruits, or demonstration plot of the coming kingdom. When the world looks at them, it catches a glimpse of the glorious future God has in store. This embodied testimony is God's means of drawing the nations to himself.

When Jesus came he did not replace God's kingdom plan; he began to fulfill it. He brought the kingdom near, he taught about it with authority, he lived it out perfectly, he extended its scope through the incorporation of Gentiles, he broke the stranglehold sin and death had on creation, and after having gathered God's people he instilled in them a vision of the kingdom that would propel them into mission. The role of God's people remains the same: to live out the kingdom Christ revealed, which is a continuation of the vision that God began to instill in Israel through Torah. The intended effect is also the same: that the nations would be drawn to God through the witness of God's people.

*Concrete Ecclesial Implications*

The ecclesial implications of the hilltop vocation of God's people are comprehensive. Every aspect of the Church's life must point to God's intentions for his creation if the world is to see the Church as a sign and foretaste of God's reign. Since Jesus authoritatively revealed what God's kingdom is like and since the Holy Spirit guided the early Church to order its life according to Jesus' revelation of the kingdom, one way to discuss these implications is to compile a list of the kingdom's attributes based on a careful study of the full New Testament witness to Christ.[18] Given the focus of this essay, however, we will take a different approach that highlights the Old Testament's most concrete contribution to the hilltop city image: the teaching of Torah. It is beyond the scope of this essay to comb Torah for all of its specific ecclesial implications. We will therefore follow a fivefold schema derived from Torah that is broad enough to address the formation of God's people in all ages, and we will show how the various teachings of

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[18] Appendix B furnishes a list of kingdom characteristics based on this approach.

Torah exemplify the holistic shalom to which God has set apart his people to bear witness.

Since the purpose of Torah is to shape Israel's life to reflect God's original intentions for creation, which cannot be separated from the culmination of creation in God's kingdom as revealed in Christ, there is an organic connection between Eden, Torah, and Christ. Since the way of Christ is the way of Eden, the Fall of Eden constitutes a fall from the way of Christ. When Torah was given to Israel, its purpose was to form a people whose life points to the way of Christ that was lost when Eden fell. This means that by analyzing the effects of the Fall, we may develop helpful categories that identify the kinds of problems Torah was designed to counteract.

The effects of the Fall may be divided into two categories: essential and relational. With respect to essence, we observe that both humans and nonhuman creation suffer fragmentation in the form of death, degeneration, and decay. God's answer to such fragmentation is restoration. From a relational perspective, we observe friction in the form of distance, discord, and division between humans and God, humans and humans, and humans and creation. God's answer to such friction is reconciliation. In sum, God's original shalomic harmony gave way to friction and fragmentation, which manifested itself in five ways. These five ways provide helpful categories for showing how Torah shaped Israel to be a hilltop city from which the Church has much to learn.

Fragmentation of humanity

In Genesis 3, the fragmentation of humanity manifests itself in terms of death, shame, painful childbirth, and painful toil, thought the fragmentation does not stop there. As history unfolds, it manifests itself also in terms of physical and mental illness,

physical and mental disability, depression, self-loathing, addiction, selfishness, loneliness, and so forth. Since God gave Torah to his people to bring restoration to human fragmentation, we should expect to find teachings in Torah that point both backward to the shalom of Eden and forward to the consummated shalom of Christ's kingdom. This is exactly what we find. In sabbath legislation we find instructions for human rest to counteract the overwork that can follow from painful toil (Exod 23:12). In cleanness laws we find helpful instructions both for averting sickness and containing disease (Lev 13). If Israel keeps Torah, God vows to prevent sickness, protect the unborn from miscarriages, and guard the aged from premature death (Exod 23:25-26).

These samples are not exhaustive, but they point to God's desire to shape Israel's life to be a witness to human restoration. The Church continues this witness. Many Torah principles remain helpful guides toward physical wholeness. In addition, God's Spirit has granted more power for healing sickness and infirmity, casting out demons, and ultimately overcoming death by means of bodily resurrection. Being a city on a hill means that the Church must avoid all forms of neo-Gnosticism that reduce Christianity to a spiritual religion that minimizes the importance of the human body and God's commitment to restoring it along with the rest of creation.

Fragmentation of nonhuman creation

In Genesis 3, the fragmentation of nonhuman creation manifests itself in terms of the cursed soil that withholds its produce, the growth of thorns and thistles, and the shrewdest animal's demotion to lowly existence. This fragmentation also manifests itself in terms of animal death, species extinction, and barren wastelands. Torah partly counteracts such consequences with Israel's sabbatical laws. Not only are humans

allowed to rest on the seventh day, but so are the animals (Exod 23:12). The sabbath year

law was especially beneficial to the soil as it afforded the soil a full year to replenish its

natural resources (Exod 23:10-11).

In these small ways, Israel's life pointed to God's restoration of creation. The

New Testament likely does not emphasize this theme because it was not an issue with

which God's people struggled. If anything there is evidence that certain Jews were

overzealous to protect sabbath laws (Mark 2:23-28). Still the restoration of creation was

on the Jewish and early Christian radar as evident in Paul's words in Roman 8:20-22:

"For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one

who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay

and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole

creation has been groaning in labor pains until now." According to Paul, the restoration

of God's people is inextricably bound up with the restoration of all creation.[19] For this

reason, the Church's hilltop witness ought to encourage others to value God's good

creation.

Friction between humans and humans

In Genesis 3, the friction between humans and other humans manifests itself in

terms of Eve's tempting Adam, Adam blaming Eve, anxiety about nakedness, and the

tension between males and females. This particular consequence of sin manifests itself in

countless additional ways throughout Scripture and human experience, including racial

tension, xenophobia, age discrimination, poverty, acts of hatred and revenge, bloodshed,

abuse, sexual deviance, sibling rivalry, and marital failure. Torah arguably contains more

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[19] Cf. also Acts 3:21.

specific laws to foster interpersonal harmony than all of the other categories combined. There are laws fostering the health of marriage (Deut 24:5), care for aliens (Lev 19:33), provision for the poor (Deut 15:1-18), abolition of slavery (Exod 21:2), love for neighbor (Lev 19:18), and respect for the aged (Lev 19:32). To this list could be added the negative laws proscribing adultery, murder, theft, dishonest testimony, coveting, and so forth.

To follow these laws would be to cultivate a society that mirrors both the peaceful relations latent in the Garden of Eden and the interpersonal harmony that typifies the reign of God inaugurated by Christ. Jesus and the apostles' endorsement of these laws and extension of their application demonstrate that ecclesiology cannot ignore the Gospel's social implications. In some cases, the Gospel goes farther than Torah (e.g., neither male nor female, Jew nor Gentile; cf. Gal 3:28), but this movement stands in fundamental continuity with the direction of Torah, which prepares for this further movement in a contextually appropriate manner (Deut 15:12 and Lev 19:33). Congregations that exist as hilltop cities must therefore demonstrate the transformation of social relations that befits God's original intentions for creation and the ultimate form they will take when Christ returns.

Friction between humans and creation

In Genesis 3, the friction between humans and nonhuman creation manifests itself in terms of Eve's blaming the serpent, hostility between the Eve and the serpent's offspring, and the sweat and toil involved in human farming. Since the industrial revolution, this tension has escalated at an unprecedented pace, leading to exploitation of natural resources; pollution of skies, water, and land; ozone depletion; cruel treatment of animals; and deforestation. In Torah, God was shaping his people to counteract poor

stewardship of the land, which God gave humans to serve and keep (Gen 2:15). The

sabbath day and year laws, as noted above, are important steps in that direction. There are

also laws advocating respectful treatment of animals (Exod 23:19; Deut 25:4) and

prohibiting excessive deforestation (Deut 20:19). Furthermore many of the tithes and

offerings are given to remind God's people to be grateful for the gifts of God's good

creation (Deut 26:1-15).

Once again, much of this is presumed in the New Testament and not emphasized

because first century Jews and Christians did not possess the technology to destroy the

earth's natural resources and to drive its animals into extinction. Yet if our restoration is

of one piece with creation's restoration (Rom 8) and if "all things, whether on earth or in

heaven" have found reconciliation in the cross of Christ (Col 1:20), then Christians have

every reason to make shalomic harmony with creation a constitutive part of their witness.

As cities on a hill, congregations ought to lead out in recycling, environmental

conservation, humane treatment of animals, exemplary farming, and eco-friendly

construction. Environmental concern is an important area in which Israel's Torah

provides resources for reflection that the New Testament, for the most part, lacks.

Friction between humans and God

Genesis 3 says comparatively little about the changed relationship between God

and humans introduced by the Fall. Adam and Eve's shameful hiding indicates that fear

of judgment is one consequence. Human disobedience and the quest for autonomy mean

that trust between God and humanity has been broken. The first four of the Fall's

consequences, as discussed above, mean that God's intentions have been thwarted and

that humans are the cause. The mistreatment of one another and of nonhuman creation

are acts of rebellion against God who commands otherwise. After the expulsion from the garden this ruptured relationship manifests itself in worshipping other gods, making images, profaning God's name, continuing rebellion, breaching covenant, neglecting tithes, ignoring prophets, and crucifying the messiah. In Torah, God begins to mend this relationship by dwelling among his people in the tabernacle (Lev 26:11), speaking to his people through prophets (Deut 18:18), revealing the divine name (Exod 3:14), instructing the Israelites as to proper worship (Deut 12), providing the means of atoning for human sin (Lev 16:30), and revealing God's saving will to the people through Torah (Exod 24:12).

In the New Testament, God continues to form a people who relate properly to him. God does this through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. He does this by indwelling his people by his Spirit. He does this through hearing and answering their prayers. He does this by showering the Church with his gifts (Eph 4:8-13) and teaching his people what worship he finds acceptable (Rom 12:1-3 and Jas 1:27). The Church therefore completes its exemplary task and fulfills its hilltop calling by showing the world what it looks like for fallen humans to accept the peace that God has forged with all humankind.

Being a city on hill meant for Israel the restoration of humanity and nonhuman creation, as well as reconciliation between humans and humans, humans and nonhuman creation, and humans and God. It meant all these things because the problem of sin meant friction and fragmentation in all of these areas. Furthermore, the prophets anticipated a day when God would bring restoration and reconciliation in all of these areas, and the early Church claimed that day began in Jesus (Acts 3:18-26 and Col 1:20). If the

consequences of sin were devastating in all these areas, the witness of Israel was wide

enough to be exemplary in all these areas, and the work of Christ brought wholeness in

all these areas, then how much more should local churches—the messianic cities on a

hill—continue to bear faithful witness in all these areas.

## Conclusion

The Levites played a special role in ancient Israel. They exemplified for all Israel

what it means to be God's set-apart servants, mediators, and witnesses. In calling Israel a

nation of priests, Scripture reminds us that the Levites were not the only exemplary

people in Palestine. To the extent that the people as a whole lived lightly in their own

land, extended risky hospitality to aliens, and ordered their lives around Torah, they

performed their role as God's priestly people and served as powerful witnesses not only

to the world, but to the Church.[20]

Furthermore, when a canonical-directional approach to Scripture is employed, a

coherent reading of the Old Testament emerges that stands in fundamental continuity

with the way of Christ in the New Testament and is ideally suited for ecclesiology. The

Old Testament is relevant to ecclesiology not merely as the back story to the formation of

God's people but as the beginning, middle, and near completion of that formation. The

Old Testament should not be read as the account of how God tried to form one type of

people—a grand monarchical type—and then scrambled to replace it with another when

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[20] Though it is beyond the scope of this essay to say more, it seems that the Jewish people today still have much to teach the nations about how to live in God's world as servants and not world rulers, mediators and not criminal executioners, witnesses and not society's custodians. While countless Christians since Constantine have occupied themselves with trying to run the Western world, the majority of Jews (up until the twentieth century Zionist Movement) kept exploring what it means to be God's people on foreign soil. Indeed, if the narration of the Old Testament offered here is correct, then we have less reason to think that those Jews who still seek to live according to the Old Testament Scriptures (albeit through the lens of Rabbinic Judaism) are committed to something fundamentally different than that to which followers of Christ are committed.

that did not work out. It is the account of how God's people resisted, to no avail,

becoming the type of people God was forming them to be from the beginning: a priestly

kingdom that serves, mediates, and bears witness to God's ultimate intentions for his

creation.

# APPENDIX A: SUMMARY OF A REVISED YODERIAN NARRATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

## Primeval History

(1) God creates a peaceful world in which genuinely free humans live in harmony with one another and nonhuman creation. Had humans never fallen into sin, the sword-backed state and other forms of domineering leadership would never have been necessary for maintaining order and justice. The gracious way of Christ is fully compatible with this prelapsarian order of creation.

(2) Humans use their freedom to assert their autonomy over and against divine sovereignty, which leads to their fall from created harmony. The subsequent disharmony manifests itself in at least five ways: estrangement between humans and nonhuman creation (represented by the soil), estrangement among humans (represented by the subordination of women to men), devolution from egalitarian to domineering leadership structures, corruption of the good cosmic and local powers that God created to maintain order throughout the world, and debilitation of humanity's noetic capacity to reliably interpret their experiences of reality. God graciously elects to preserve the created order, though under the fallen conditions that the humans chose in their freedom.

(3) Cain murders his innocent brother Abel, thereby laying the foundation for fallen civilization with its vengeance-based state, fear-based society, and unnatural culture. God graciously uses the fear- and vengeance-based human reflexes to protect humans from one another and maintain basic order in society.

(4) Violence escalates upon the earth to such an extent that every human thought is evil all the time. God is filled with grief and regrets creating humans. Rather than bring a decisive end to the created order, God washes the surface of the earth clean while preserving a remnant of all living species including sinful humans. God reaffirms his commitment to life by placing all bloodshed under his jurisdiction and by covenanting with his creation never to destroy it again. In so doing, he places the burden upon himself to find some way to guide his creation and deal with sin other than to destroy it.

(5) Humans rebel against God's commission to scatter and fill the earth by unifying around the Babel construction project. God graciously intervenes by terminating their architectural unity in rebellion and restarting the centripetal scattering he previously set into motion. God's providential scattering of these primitive *Babel*onians anticipates the later scattering of Israel that terminated their monarchical unity in rebellion at the hand of the later Babylonians.

## Israelite History

(1) God responds to the primeval human predicament by calling Abraham out of the heart of Babylon, with its advanced civilization, to become the progenitor of a peculiar people with a particular way of being in the world so that God may use his descendants to bless all nations. Trust in YHWH alone is the test of Abraham's faithfulness and the foundation for the peculiar people that God is forming through him. Since his descendants needed to multiply in number without losing their distinct identity and because the residents of Canaan were not ready for divine judgment, God relocates Abraham's descendants in Egypt where they are eventually enslaved.

(2) Though Egypt is an ideal place to grow in number, it proves an unfit place for Abraham's descendants to order their lives according to God's intentions. God therefore calls them out of the high civilization of Egypt and into the particular way of life he sets forth for them in Torah. By delivering the Israelites without their help and by setting forth the laws that must govern their life together, God is forming his people in such a way that they must depend on him alone for their deliverance, security, and way of life. By ordering their life according to Torah, he is forming them into an exemplary people whose way of life may be used by God to bless all nations.

(3) After forging a covenantal relationship with Israel, God leads them into the land of Canaan where he intends to order their lives according to Torah. To make his people a witness against the economic oppression of empires and the violent nature of nation states, God establishes Israel without centralized leadership and standing army. Instead, he reins over them directly through a plurality of decentralized offices and he sustains them with the phenomenon of YHWH war. Without the egocentric aims of a human king, Israel would be better positioned to order its life according to the radical economic, social, judicial, and political vision of Torah.

(4) Shortly after occupying the land, however, the Israelites forsake the covenant by abandoning Torah. God therefore withdraws his blessing and protection and leaves them vulnerable to attacks from neighboring nations. Yet God does not abandon them altogether. Through mighty judges he gives them a taste of what long term deliverance might look like should they renew the covenant. Rather than do so, the Israelites rebel and request a king like the nations around them. This decision launches a tragic detour in the life of God's people. In choosing a king they essentially renounce YHWH war,

YHWH's kingship, and YHWH's law. In sum, they fail to trust God alone and reject his plan for forming them to be a blessing to the nations.

(5) Israel's kings are at their best when they rely on God's deliverance and at their worst when they play the military game. Overall, the kingship lives up to its negative expectations and the prophets disparage it. They do not, however, forsake the concept of kingship altogether. In visions of future hope, the prophets depict a truly faithful king who adheres to Torah and whose rule reflects God's reign. Isaiah goes further than any prophet in remolding the notion of kingship to reflect the kind of posture God always desired for Israel: a lowly servant with universal significance.

(6) Though Israel's historians narrate the monarchy in diverse ways, the cumulative canonical effect is a trajectory leading to monarchy's collapse. Canonical strands that speak against monarchy and point to a different kind of future include Deuteronomy 17's description of a king unlike any Israel had, Gideon and Jotham's critique of kingship's earliest beginnings, the negative account of monarchy in 1 Samuel 8, and the Chronicler's advocacy for the holy war posture of trust in God alone.

(7) Through Jeremiah, God calls Israel out of its self-imposed monarchical cul-de-sac and into a dynamic new scattered posture that is conducive to blessing the nations. This scattering is not a temporary hiatus from monarchy but a long-term arrangement that calls for a permanent change in Israel's self-understanding and formation and paves the way for the impending messianic mission. As strangers in strange lands, they must depend on God alone for their well-being and survival. Joseph, Daniel, and Esther serve as models for such dependence.

(8) God is not, however, finished with Jerusalem. He had chosen this city and its people as the launching point for the forthcoming messianic mission. To prepare them for this, he sends Ezra, Nehemiah, and others back from exile to reorder Israel's life in the land as a Persian province, lacking political independence and monarchical organization. This community would be like diasporic Jewish communities insofar as it lacked political independence and had to order its life according to Torah under the conditions of foreign occupation. Israel's presence in the land, with its temple, preserved the set-apart status God desired for Israel in preparation for its unique role in the messianic mission.

(9) Since diasporic dynamics are appropriate not only for life in Babylon but also back in Palestine, efforts to reestablish monarchial existence after Cyrus' decree are doomed to fail. Indeed, all Second Temple Jewish attempts at national independence ultimately fail, including those of the Hasmoneans, Herodians, Sadduceans, and Zealots. This does not mean that Israel's international enemies would triumph. The book of Daniel graphically depicts God's victory over foreign oppressors and ultimate restoration of God's people without their having to take matters into their own hands.

(10) The ministry of Jesus and witness of first century congregations continue the Jeremianic trajectory. In all their novelty, they make no attempts to reestablish anything like Israel's actual kingship. Rather they proclaim a king, kingdom, and accompanying ecclesiology that stand in fundamental continuity with the Old Testament strands that push beyond the monarchy, especially the lowly servant vision.

APPENDIX B: MARKS OF A KINGDOM WITNESSING CHURCH

1. Places God's Kingdom above all else (Matt 6:33; 13:44, 45; 19:12; Mark 9:47; Luke 12:31; 18:29-30).
2. Shows equality on multiple levels: gender, race, age, heritage, social/economic status, and religious status (1 Cor 12:13; 2 Cor 5:16-17; Gal 3:27-28; 6:15; Eph 2:11-22; Col 3:9-11).
3. Unifies through diversity (John 17:20-24; 1 Cor 1:10; 12:1-31; Eph 4:1-6).
4. Lives by love: community members (John 13:34-35), neighbors (Mark 12:28-34), enemies (Matt 5:43-48), and outcasts (Matt 25:31-46).
5. Accepts persecution and suffering (Matt 5:10; Acts 14:22; Rom 5:3-5; 1 Thess 1:5; 2 Tim 2:3; 1 Pet 3:8-17).
6. Forgives and reconciles at all levels (Matt 6:14-15; 18:21-35; John 20:22-23; 2 Cor 5:18-19).
7. Confounds those not in tune with God's Spirit (Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10; 1 Cor 1:18-25; 2:6-16; 2 Pet 2:12).
8. Follows the Spirit's leading (John 16:13-15; Rom 8:13, 14; 1 Cor 2:10-16; Gal 5:25).
9. Embodies cross-shaped wisdom (Mark 8:34-35; 1 Cor 1:17-2:16; 3:19; Jas 3:13-18).
10. Exhibits sincere, diligent, fruit-bearing faith (Matt 5:20; 13:43; 21:43; 25:1-13; Luke 9:62; Rom 14:17).
11. Values children and childlikeness (Matt 18:1-5; 19:14; Mark 10:14, 15; Luke 18:16-17).
12. Assimilates the poor more easily than the wealthy (Matt 19:23, 24; Mark 10:23-25, Luke 6:20; Jas 2:5).
13. Welcomes the undeserving and unexpected (Matt 20:1; 21:28-32; 22:2-14).
14. Flees from and repents of immorality (1 Cor 6:9-10, 18; 2 Cor 6:14-18; 12:21; Gal 5:21; Eph 5:5; 1 Cor 5:1-5; 1 Pet 2:9-12).
15. Grows in ways only understood by God (Mark 4:26; Luke 17:20; John 18:36; Col 2:18-19).
16. Cultivates Christ-like spirituality (Rom 8:9-17; Gal 5:22-23).
17. Expresses concern for the marginalized of society (Matt 25:31-46; Luke 4:18-21; Jas 1:27).
18. Assumes a humble servant's posture (Matt 5:3; 18:1-5; 19:30; 20:1-16, 20-28; Mark 9:33-37; John 13:1-17).
19. Attracts frauds as well as genuine converts (Matt 13:24; 13:47; 1 Cor 11:19).
20. Esteems small, unimpressive beginnings (Matt 13:31; Mark 4:30-33; Luke 13:18-19).
21. Infiltrates the world (Matt 13:33; Luke 13:21).
22. Seeks peace even when it hurts (Matt 5:38-48; Rom 12:14-21; 1 Cor 6:1-8; Eph 2:13-18; 1 Pet 2:18-25; 3:9-18; Rev 2:9-10; 7:9-17).
23. Makes Christ-like disciples (John 13:15; Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 11:1; 2 Cor 3:18; 1 Pet 2:21-25; 1 John 4:17).

24. Hopes in a bodily resurrection (1 Cor 15), eternal life (Gal 6:7-10), restoration of earth (Rom 8:18-25; Rev 21), judgment on powers and personalities counter to God's kingdom (2 Cor 15:24-28; Col 2:15).
25. Accesses God's power through prayer (Luke 11:9-13; 1 Thess 5:17; Jas 5:13-18).

APPENDIX C: THESES

**Theses Related to Dissertation**

1. No ecclesial primer has been dedicated exclusively to assessing the Old Testament's relevance to ecclesiology. Yet, an Israel-like view of the Church has ecumenical promise since the Old Testament is shared by diverse ecclesial traditions in ways that certain persons, events, and creedal affirmations in Church history are not.

2. A "canonical-directional" hermeneutic helps those who do not specialize in Old Testament studies to take the contributions of biblical studies seriously without becoming so overwhelmed by unresolved textual and historical issues that the Old Testament's contributions to ecclesiology are overlooked. It is "canonical" insofar as it engages the Old Testament in its final form and in light of the entire biblical canon. It is "directional" insofar as it reads Old Testament passages in their historical contexts (according the best resources of biblical studies) as pointing forward to the New Testament work of God through Christ and his followers, not backwards from the New Testament to the Old as a departure from the way of Christ.

3. From an ecclesiological perspective, the New Testament should be read as an organic continuation of what God was doing through Israel in the Old Testament. In dispersing some of his people throughout many lands (in Jeremiah's day) and in refortifying others of his people in Jerusalem as a Persian vassal rather than an independent and powerful empire (in Ezra's day), God was already posturing them for their future messianic mission.

4. Monarchy like the nations was never God's will for his people because it represented a form of rule that stood in tension with God's rule over his people and because it postured God's people in the world as a competitor against other nations rather than as a servant through which God would bless other nations. The servanthood anticipated in Isaiah's servant songs and exemplified in Jesus' life and teaching was therefore not a way for God's people to rule over the world but an alternative to such ruling over.

5. The term "priestly nation" serves as an apt metaphor to describe how the Church is a continuation of the direction God was leading his people Israel in the Old Testament. Churches are like priests in that they reside in the land of others (priests lived among the tribes), show hospitality to those who are suspect in the eyes of society (priests occupied and oversaw Israel's cities of refuge), and mediate God's will for humanity to others (priests served as Israel's Torah experts).

**Theses Related to Course Work**

6. Many of the allegorical readings of Scripture employed throughout Church history (e.g., Bernard of Clairvaux's interpretation of the Song of Songs as a song of God's love for his people) are not as undisciplined as historical critics sometimes assert.

7. Schleiermacher's "free church" ecclesiology was deeply rooted in the philosophical commitments of Romanticism. He thus serves as a warning to Free Church thinkers that the notion of ecclesial freedom may easily be subordinated to philosophical frameworks that are not necessarily compatible with Christian thought.

8. Barth's "free church" ecclesiology is more about God's freedom to rule the Church than it is about human autonomy. He thus helps contemporary Free Church thinkers to ground the notion of ecclesial freedom theologically and to avoid some of the pitfalls of Western individualistic autonomy, which threaten the integrity of the Free Church vision.

9. All Christians possess a single all-encompassing vocation, which is to announce and bear witness to Christ's reign in all that they do. All other vocations Christians pursue should take place within that vocation.

10. To deny that humans in the fallen world have epistemologically reliable access to absolute truth that can serve as an indubitable foundation for Christian thought is not to deny that there is absolute truth that is grounded in God and revealed in Christ.

**Theses Related to Personal Interest**

11. Christian eschatology must account for God's restoration of all creation. Though this is a comparatively minor theme in the New Testament, it is a major theme in the Old Testament that has in no way been abrogated by Christ.

12. The soteriological implications of the cross of Christ should not be divorced from its social implications. The New Testament teaches that the cross of Christ not only reconciles humans to God but also abolishes the wall that divides humans.

13. Language of "God's kingdom" remains a significant and viable way to frame discussions about the Gospel of Christ. Though language of "kingdom" can be confusing, it encourages evangelists to situate the salvation offered in Christ within the broader story of what God has been doing in world history since Abraham.

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