



THE BIBLE, HUMAN SEXUALITY, MARRIAGE AND SAME-SEX UNIONS

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Preliminary Meditation

From *The Silver Chair*, by C.S. Lewis:

Thirdly, the pain itself made Puddleglum's head for a moment perfectly clear and he knew exactly what he really thought. There is nothing like a good shock of pain for dissolving certain kinds of magic.

'One word, Ma'am [Queen of the Underworld],' he said, coming back from the fire; limping, because of the pain. 'One word. All you've been saying is quite right, I shouldn't wonder. I'm a chap who always liked to know the worst and then put the best face I can on it. So I won't deny any of what you said. But there's one more thing to be said, even so. Suppose we have only dreamed, or made up, all those things—trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours is the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that's a funny thing, when you come to think of it. We're just babies making up a game, if you're right. But four babies playing a game can make a play-world which licks your real world hollow. That's why I'm going to stand by the play world. I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia. So, thanking you kindly for our supper, if these two gentlemen and the young lady are ready, we're leaving your court at once and setting out in the dark to spend our lives looking for overland. Not that our lives will be very long, I should think; but that's small loss if the world's as dull a place as you say.'

1. The Canon, Past and Present and Authority in Interpreting the Scriptures

I begin by commenting on some hermeneutic issues. These would relate to two or three broad questions.

- 1) What is the overarching framework within which I understand and interpret various biblical texts?
- 2) What is the relation between interpreters of the past and interpreters in the present?
- 3) Is there some sort of achievable objective understanding of the biblical text?

I will then move to discuss specific issues relating to what I understand the biblical texts to point to in relation to human sexuality and marriage, and finally how that relates to the more specific question of same-sex relationships.

1) What is the overarching framework within which I understand and interpret various biblical texts?¹

I understand the New Testament, with its invitation to all humanity to enter into the revelation and life of God through the saving life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and by openness to and acceptance of the action of the Holy Spirit in transforming and giving life to all that is, to be inseparable in both intent and interpretation from the writings of the Old Testament. In seeking to understand the mind of Jesus Christ, therefore, I start first from reflecting on the witness of Israel in its classic Jewish form: Torah, Prophets and Writings. This does not mean, however, that I interpret these texts in as if I had to pretend to have only the mind of an early first century CE Jew. Equally, it does not mean that I imagine that Jesus Christ was simplistically preoccupied in the manner of the modern academy with matters of historical origins.

The Torah

From this perspective, I understand the Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy) to be of overarching importance for all other interpretation. I do not understand Torah to mean “law” in some narrow sense, but to mean “instruction” in the broadest sense. The Torah is a body of diverse types of material (narrative, law, poetry, liturgy, liturgical and communal prescriptions etc) all of which instructs us about the One God. The material itself can be construed in diverse ways as to authorship, period of origin, and organization, but I understand the entire Torah to be anchored by three critical events, which I understand to reveal the Oneness (as Jews understand the text) and the Triuneness (as Christians understand the text) of the God to which it witnesses.

Genesis—Creation, Call and Providence

At the beginning the Torah is anchored by the accounts of Genesis that assert that God created all things including humankind to be in a relationship of fellowship, communion, and fruitfulness. Then there is rupture and

1. I would want to acknowledge the central importance of Jacques Ellul, Katharine Temple, Stanley Walters, and Emmanuel Levinas, in teaching me to read the Bible, but also in teaching me about how the Bible teaches us to read. The work of Michael Welker on the inspiration of the scriptures as “witnesses” or “testimonies” has also played an important part in my more recent thinking. Our teachers, however, are not responsible for our egregious mistakes—we are. The first draft of this was prepared for the Primate’s Theological Commission in October 2007, and at their suggestion some sections were revised. Other sections were revised or rethought as a result of invitations to give lectures at St Christopher’s Burlington in December 2007 and at the Trinity Divinity Associates Conference at Trinity College, Toronto, in June 2008.

alienation—between God and humans, between human and human, between humans and creatures, and between humans and the rest of the created order. There is murder; there are the beginning of human culture, pride, violence and oppression. There is divine judgement and annihilation, and there is a remnant. There is human arrogance and seeking to displace God’s Holy Name with our own name; and divine scattering and dispersal. Drawing from a recognizable cross-cultural pool of legends and accounts of human origins, these texts (chapters 1–11), polished to lapidary finesse, open inexhaustible veins of reflection for theological anthropology, some mutually reinforcing and others mutually contradictory. At the level of choice and juxtaposition of words, they play on ambiguities, forcing us on careful reading to abandon pious simplicities, opening to our meditation all the dimensions of human intention, choice, motivation, drives, language, culture, and socio-economic forces as they interact with a God portrayed as totally free to the point of the erratic and unpredictable.

Then there are two great narratives of call and covenant (chapters 12–36). In the first Abraham becomes a paradigm of intimacy and partnership in the divine purpose—“to become a blessing to all the nations of the earth.” In the second, Jacob becomes the paradigm of struggle, denial and wrestling with the divine purpose and with other humans until “seeing his brother’s face is like seeing the face of God.” Sandwiched between is the black hole that is Isaac, his life scarred by the razor knife’s shadow with the ambiguity of genuine human faithfulness to the divine command and the human sacrifice of terror, death and exclusion that is the hallmark of all human religion. Lied to at the crucial moment by his father, lied to at the other crucial moment by his wife and son, Isaac seeks to live with integrity despite knowing God only as loveless terror and humanity as wounding duplicity. Punctuating these narratives at every nodal point are the genealogies of the nations—what appears to be set to the margin in Genesis constantly presses back to the textual centre. Driving the turns of the narrative are the mysterious figures of the Matriarchs that the Jewish tradition considers prophetesses, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel, by turns filled with insight into God’s purpose, and then at other moments amplifiers of their spouses’ dysfunctions.

The final part of Genesis (chapters 37–50) I understand as a prolonged meditation on providence in the form of the story of the life of Joseph. Here in the pit of disordered parental affection, overweening ambition, and sibling rivalry and violence opens into a life in which deprivation leads to wisdom, memory enables understanding, and human skill leads to the preservation of life across the known world. The Divine Actor, so present in the first two thirds of Genesis fades into the shadows. But here too the text opens up ambiguity. Reconciliation, framed as providence (“You meant it for evil; God meant it for good.”), is preceded by repeated episodes of deliberate vengeful terror and manipulation. The bureaucrat with the divinely given ability to plan for the preservation of the whole world pursues an economic strategy that leads to the total enslavement of both the Egyptian and his own people.

Exodus through Numbers—Deliverance and The Liminal Learning Experience

The three central books of the Torah (Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers) have as their core God’s action in liberating a people from slavery in Egypt to freedom and the Divine summons at Sinai to become a community that reflects the very life of God—both holy and just. This work of salvation, redemption and summoning to community is a work that is both cosmic and situated in history (Exodus 15)—the two are inseparable. The “getting glory over the gods of Egypt” is at one with the overthrow of “Pharaoh and his men of arms,” and I understand this cosmic/historic reality to be consistently present in all the major New Testament articulations of the work and person of Jesus Christ, and to be essential to understanding his work and person. We cannot understand the work of Christ on the Cross apart from the deliverance from Egypt; the deliverance from Egypt for Christians is equally interpreted by the work of the Cross, and the texts present both Passover and Eucharist as prolepsis and anamnesis—simultaneously a proclamation in faith before the event that God does act, and a subsequent remembering in faith of the event of God’s action. There can be no “salvation” that is merely individual or merely “spiritual.” For it to be part of the

work of the God of the Torah and the God of Jesus Christ it must be connected to a real change in individual and communal socio-historic conditions that clearly manifests human freedom for God in all its aspects both freedom from the physical and spiritual manifestations of human slavery and oppression (power and economics, the tools of Pharaoh) and freedom from physical and spiritual manifestations of slavery to the false gods (social taboos and human sacrifice, the tools of religion).

Linked to the summoning and creation of the new community in Exodus is the narrative of a prolonged period of liminality, a period in which the community lives on the edge (both physically and in relation to all human society) in the desert. In this period they learn the nature of the new community in things that are *spoken and heard* (laws, narratives, retellings of narratives), in things which are *shown and seen* (miraculous actions, experiences of the community), and in things which are *done and participated in* (the making of the covenant, the “picnic” before God on the mountain-top, the making of the tabernacle, the consecration of priests etc.).² All of these form part of the instruction as to the nature and the life of the community—revealing God’s intention for the community and also the mechanisms by which the life of the faithful community may be sustained. At the heart of this prolonged and elaborated instruction is the assertion that the community must reflect the very life and inner being of the God who delivers the people from slavery into freedom. As God is both holy and just, the community of God’s people cannot be holy without being just, and cannot be just without being holy.

Deuteronomy—Justice and Mercy as the Purpose of the Spirit’s Work of Reinterpretation

At its conclusion the Torah is anchored by the book of Deuteronomy which looks forward to a community of justice and holiness living in the place God has appointed for them. Its unique form however is the retelling and reinterpretation not only of the “narrative” that precedes it but also of the legal tradition that precedes it. This action of Moses is both retrospective and prospective, and I understand this “representation” in Deuteronomy to point to the crucial work of the Holy Spirit in making present the life of God in “re-creating” the life of the continuing and faithful community of God’s people in all times and ages. This work is always a work of reinterpretation and adaptation to new circumstances, and Deuteronomy simultaneously commands and models this process. It is present, though, throughout the Torah at its most basic in the multiple forms in which we find the Ten Commandments in all the books from Exodus through Deuteronomy.

The name Deuteronomy, from the Greek “*deuteros nomos*,” “the second law,” reflects a basic reality of the book, which is a retelling and a restating of the key civil and religious legal traditions found elsewhere in the Torah, particularly in Exodus.³ The Hebrew name for the book is *Devarim*—“Words,” “Speeches,” or “Things,” after the first line of the text which reads “These are the Words/These are the Speeches/ these are the Things which Moses spoke to all of Israel across the Jordan in the wilderness....” Imaginatively, the book is the final address, the last will and testament, of a great leader—that’s how it’s framed, and at its conclusion Moses makes the lonely climb up Mount Nebo where he is allowed to see the Promised Land he will never enter because of his anger and impatience with his people over the years, and there he dies.

2. Those familiar with the work of Victor Turner on liminality, and liminal instruction will recognize his most useful framework and insights here.

3. This is how the text presents itself to us in its plain sense. We should note that there are cogent scholarly arguments that the versions of the law in Exodus and elsewhere are reliant on the laws in Deuteronomy. See especially John van Seters. Even if these arguments are true, the canon itself presents this to us as a matter of reinterpretation of traditions inspired by new context and necessities.

If the Hebrew name draws our attention as interpreters to the texture of the book as the words or speeches of Moses to the next generation as they reach the end of their long forty years of wandering, death and despair in the desert, the Greek name draws our attention to the large collection of laws in the middle of the book, and the way in which they are identifiably a restating of legal traditions we can often find in other forms. The Hebrew name draws our attention to the way the book models a cyclical process all faith communities require—the mechanism of passing on the core of our tradition and belief, those things which give and enable life and faithfulness, to the next generation. Will our children have faith and what sort of faith do we hope it will be? The Greek name draws our attention to the historical origins of the book in a moment of crisis and collapse during the reign of King Josiah of Judah, to the action of “restating” or “rewriting” the ancient teachings and laws as a crucial intervention in the life of the community in order to galvanize and convince people of the need for change in the behaviour and values of the entire community, from top to bottom. Deuteronomy is the first great text of “reformation” in our tradition. From the movement which inspired it, Deuteronomy carries with it a destructive baggage of violence, destruction of religious objects and people, and xenophobic fear and hatred, which has been the hallmark of all religious reform since. Nevertheless, it’s because Deuteronomy represents a genuine attempt by real faithful people in a moment of crisis to rearticulate their faith and to call other people back to the deepest roots and principles of that faith that it gets it so right, and simultaneously, as we can see in hindsight, get some of it so wrong.⁴

Recollection and Storytelling as Mercy and Hope for the Future

The first ten chapters of Deuteronomy take the form of a retelling of Israel’s history of deliverance from slavery in Egypt, meeting and covenanting with the Lord at Sinai, and their long period of forty years wandering in the desert. What Deuteronomy models for us in opening this way is the need for each generation to retell the story it has received to the next generation so that it too knows the story. But it also models for us that the story has to be retold to each new generation in the context of the future they face, not in the context of the past we have experienced. Embedded in this narrative is the essential minimal summary of Israel’s entire legal tradition, the Ten Commandments, and even these have been reframed over against the Exodus version in the light of the people’s future life in the land. But the second “summary” embedded in this retelling is the “prophetic” version of Israel’s great tradition, the one quoted above. This passage echoes something a century older than Deuteronomy, the words of Micah the prophet.

With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

4. Horribly and destructively wrong, with a nuclear half-life that we still see today impacting on and destroying people in our own Anglican communion and other Christian communities, and in the residential schools crisis of our own church here in Canada.

Micah too in his great prosecuting speech frames this by remembering the Exodus and by denouncing social and economic oppression and dishonesty. For the Deuteronomists, knowing who we are in the here and now begins with remembering the story of who we were before God entered our lives, before there was community and hope and the possibility of generosity and justice, and remembering the story of how God changed all that when we were brought out of Egypt, from slavery into freedom.

Structures and Laws—Making Room for a Culture of Mercy and Generosity

It's important not to lose sight of this set of crucial opening articulations of who God is, what God does, and what God is calling us to be. They provide the interpretive lens we need to explore the fourteen chapters of legal material that make up the middle section of the book. This is the "second law." In the allusions in the historical recollection of chapters nine and ten to the second set of tablets, written after the episode of the Golden Calf and Moses' intercession for the people, we are given to understand that this is a faithful rescription of the first law given on Sinai. But what we know from comparing the two is that they are very different in many ways. This points us in a similar direction as that indicated by the use of narrative in this tradition. The "law" given by God is not some abstract unchangeable object—it has a purpose and an end, and that is to create a community that is holy in the way that God is holy.

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing.

What makes this God so worthy of praise and worship is precisely that this God is unlike the gods of the nations who are guarantors of royal and other forms of power and control, enforcers of social order, generators of wealth, prosperity and fertility (i.e. all the idols of the state, the economy, religion and the family). The God of the Deuteronomists also provides those things to the faithful, but they rise primarily out of the creation of the community of justice and generosity, out of care for the poor and weak, and (as these texts keep reiterating) for the stranger, for the one who is an outsider, who is different, who does not naturally belong. So the law too must be reinterpreted and reshaped in every generation to ensure that the law itself remains faithful to its purpose—the creation of this community of justice, generosity and mercy. The book echoes with this contradiction— "*not a word must be changed or altered,*" "*remember to keep all the commandments,*" yet the opening of chapter 23, after legislating categories of "aliens" and outsiders reminds the hearers that they too were "aliens", a message reinforced even more dramatically in the gleaning laws at the end of chapter 24.

While we may read some of these laws and wonder how they create a community of justice and mercy, scholars have long been aware that they generally offer versions of earlier Israelite or Near Eastern legislation that are more considerate of women and slaves. But these laws also legislate about the working conditions and rights of animals, and the rights of trees.

You shall not plough with an ox and a donkey yoked together. (22:10)

You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain. (25:4)

If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down. Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you? You may destroy only the trees that you know do not produce food; you may cut them down for use in building siege-works against the town that makes war with you, until it falls. (20:19-20)

These injunctions are unique to the Deuteronomic version of the law. Over and over again, however, the first lens through which we are told to interpret the law is the memory that we were once slaves in Egypt. The ordering of the groups of laws constantly refocuses our attention on the need for a just economy as the purpose and foundation of all our religious activity, our political order and our sacral order. The first laws to do with homicide are those setting up the cities of refuge—the foundational assumption is that that mercy and generosity are paramount. First the innocent must have a place of escape and protection, and secondly, homicide is most likely unintentional. Throughout, the deuteronomic legal collection presses on us the priority of structures and assumptions of generosity. Second only to the centrality of Jerusalem as a public structure of unity and worship is the regular remission of all debt. This version of the law is a response to a world where the rich and powerful controlled and could buy justice—and at its most radical point it completely re-imagines what a king should be.

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.

No military power, no social luxury, no excess of wealth, total equality with the community, immersed in the study of this law—what a strange notion of political leadership. But we might recall that, this is being proposed in a world which has known lots of traditional Near-Eastern kingship and knows that it doesn't work.

Ritual and Proclamation—Embedding a Culture in Individual and Corporate Memory

The legal section closes with the account of the ritual of the first fruits and tithe offerings (Deuteronomy 26, the passage which forms the foundation for the traditional Jewish Passover Aggadah). It then looks ahead to the ritual the people will undertake when they enter the land in which they will set up stones at the border and write the law on them and pronounce solemn blessings and cursings from Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. So Deuteronomy teaches us that a crucial element of creating and transforming culture has to do with finding and creating the rituals and processes that enable both individual members of the community and the community as a whole to rehearse and own their identity on a regular basis.

Every year the individual Israelite comes with his first fruit offerings and his family, and makes a proclamation. He tells the story of Israel, but he tells it as his own story of God's love and generosity.

Then together with the Levites and the aliens who reside around them, they celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord God has given to them. And every third year after paying the tithe required and giving it to the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows, so that they may eat their fill, then the Israelite makes this proclamation.

As the text models it, *first we take the actions that create a community of justice and love*, and only then do we talk about our state of holiness, and our fulfillment of religious observance. “I have not offered any of it to the dead...”—this is no simple statement about not participating in some form of foreign cult of the dead. This is a fundamental affirmation that only in caring for the Levites, the strangers and outsiders, the orphans and the widows, can we create a society that will know and experience true life, the life God desires and gives.

Beyond Proposition—Process as Revelation

As much of what goes before this would indicate, I understand the “instruction” of the Torah to be not merely propositional but *processual*. What we are to learn is not simply a matter of “laws” to be memorized and obeyed, but a story out of which all meaning emerges, and a larger sequence of texts, divided into sub-texts, in which the interrelations of the parts with the overarching whole, but also internally within the parts themselves, engage us in a dynamic process of understanding through both amplification and reiteration but also through contradiction and juxtaposition.⁵ Likewise, certain details of the text, may, because of their positioning in relation to key narrative or structural nodes of the text, bear a “symbolic” or “theoretical” weight greater than the detail itself.⁶

It would be equally important to note that from this perspective, there can be no distinction between “law” and “grace.” The entire instruction of the Torah is grace since it speaks of only of One God, who creates, saves and sanctifies, and that God is, from beginning to end a God of grace. God’s work in creation is grace because we are given time and life and companionship—we experience grace in becoming part of the history of the creation God wills. God’s work in deliverance and redemption from slavery and creation of a new community of justice and holiness is grace because we are given freedom and hope within history—we experience grace in being delivered from the domination of the powers that govern history. God’s work in enabling us to reinterpret the history and law is grace because we are given new opportunities to extend the community of freedom and hope despite history—we experience grace in being entrusted with the capacity to respond in every generation to the forces that would reduce the Triune God to simply another of the gods, and the community of hope that manifests the reign of God to being simply another form of human religion.

The Prophets

The second part of the Scriptures of the Old Testament which forms a part of the hermeneutic framework is the Prophets (Joshua through 2 Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Collection of the Twelve). I understand these

5. To give an example, I understand the overall structure of Numbers to be symmetrical around the central chapter 19, the ritual of the red heifer, which offers the ritual healing for “death.” Broadly, I understand the scope of the instruction in Numbers to have to do with the realities of the life and leadership of the community. Within this larger structural framework, I understand the seemingly disjunct ritual instructions of chapters 5 and 6 (especially the rituals of the jealous husband and the wife suspected of adultery and the nazirites), and contextually intrusive seeming regulations regarding the bindingness of women’s vows in chapter 30, to be in a structural relationship that presses us to reflect on the relationship between familial disruptions and individual “behaviours” and their power to disrupt and destroy communities, and the need for appropriate mechanisms for articulating boundaries in relation to private and public. The structure forces us to read and meditate on these instructions both for similarities and differences and deeper relationships.

6. So, for instance, at the Exodus the Israelite people are commanded to borrow silver and gold from their Egyptian neighbours. Reference to the gold reappears at three crucial narrative junctures: at the moment of the departure from Egypt, at the creation of the golden calf, and at the communal free-will offering which initiates the building of the tabernacle. I understand this sequence of references to be an articulation (at the level of deeper structural meaning) of the Torah’s understanding of foundational economic issues: first, that all communities must have an economy to survive and that all national economies have their ultimate root in theft/borrowing from someone else; secondly that the community’s economic life is inextricably entwined with its propensity to false understandings of power and false understandings of God (idolatry); thirdly, that when economic goods in the community are freely shared there is always an excess for everyone and such just and free sharing is essential for the holiness of God (the *Shekinah*) to tabernacle with the community. It doesn’t belong to us at all; it wants us to worship it instead of God; we only have power over it when we give it away.

books, both in the way they have been gathered in the Jewish canon, and in their duality of form to point to the continued witness of the community to the sustaining action of the Holy Spirit first in the very life and continuity of the community, and secondly in the Spirit's action at key moments through the life of key witnesses known as "prophets."

The Former Prophets (Joshua through Kings) present us with the extended narrative of the Israelite community's experience in the Land over a long period of about 600 years. It thus provides perspective on what communal faithfulness involves, and is an essential counterpoint at all times to the limited historical frame of the New Testament, particularly the Epistles. While the narrative as a whole unfolds within an overarching interpretive framework of divine reward for obedience and divine punishment for disobedience, at almost all critical points the diversity of the materials incorporated (however we understand origins and authorship) bring into stark juxtaposition diverse perspectives on events and choices. Joshua and Judges present opposed pictures of how the Israelites entered and settled the land. First Samuel presents starkly opposed views about the socio-political transformation of the community under royal governance. Both books of Samuel present David as the prototypical representation of the faithful "anointed one" of God, the ideal king, and both present him as a "man of blood," a murderer whose inability to deal with the disorders of his own family results in civil war. Solomon is portrayed as the epitome of the wise king and also as the greatest of idolaters. 1 and 2 Kings understand the division of the kingdom into north and south as the ultimate disaster in which the northern kingdom Israel is portrayed as the apostate party, while at the point of division it is clearly Rehoboam of Judah's failure which sparks the split. And despite the seeming rejection of the northern Kingdom Israel, the bulk of the material itself focuses mostly on God's continued presence and action in its affairs, as opposed to those of Judah to the south. The entire narrative tracks the life of God's people through social change, political change, economic change, internal upheaval and external pressures. The narrative forces us constantly to hold simultaneously to two perspectives—one that of the framework which wants us to see everything as a simple matter of obedience or disobedience, faithfulness or falling away, and the other forced on us by the ambiguities and contradictions of the narrative and the substructures of the whole, a perspective that constantly correlates faithfulness with weakness and failure, and shows even the best of human motivations and intentions to be almost the random victim of historical exigency.

This narrative portrays the Holy Spirit as acting in three distinct and crucial manifestations—but here too the narratives themselves point to critical issues. In Judges and the first part of Samuel, the Holy Spirit acts to deliver and save God's people from oppression and apostasy by working powerfully through the charisms and gifts of individual leaders. But these narratives, culminating in the tragedy of Samuel and Saul, all point to the way in which the shadow side of our human giftedness, when seized as the vehicle for the Spirit's work, is also exaggerated to destructive scope alongside our gift. In Samuel and Kings the Holy Spirit is shown at work in and through the institution of Kingship, but here too the narratives (especially that of Saul, David and Solomon) portray the way that the work of the Spirit is dependent on the adequate formation of institutional leaders. Ultimately both dynastic kingship in Judah and kingship by revolution in Israel fail because institutional leadership is over-invested in structures of power and self-preservation and construes the One God simply as the guarantor of the state and therefore the worship of God as another useful political structure (the sin of Jeroboam) or as one in a range of options in crisis and emergency (the sin of the kings of Judah). In Kings, the Holy Spirit is shown at work in and through the actions and words of the Prophets, individuals largely drawn from among the marginalized, the scandalized and the outraged, in a form of action which is essentially confrontative and disruptive. Here too, in the great juxtaposition of the Elijah and Elisha legends, we see the way in which the prophet deracinated from community (Elijah) becomes merely an angry and ultimately ineffective figure, while the prophet rooted in community (Elisha) stands at risk of becoming another collaborator with power or a political player, thus being rendered equally ineffective.

At a secondary level, the narrative of the Former Prophets understands the Holy Spirit to work through the priests and the life of the cult, but at almost every juncture the narrative portrays the priests and the cult as seduced

by the attractions of power and domination and co-opted by violence and expediency. Here again, the overarching narrative shape presents us with a paradox. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, is constantly at work and is unfailingly faithful. The human and institutional vehicles of the Spirit's action, on the other hand, must constantly be viewed with the deepest skepticism. I understand particularly the Petrine but also the Pauline traditions of the New Testament under this rubric, not simply because the Former Prophets teach us to read all texts in this fashion, but because the Petrine and Pauline texts (in the Gospels, Acts and Paul's letters) themselves bear all the same hallmarks of ambiguity about power, multiple perspectives, and human weakness, through which the Spirit works.

The second part of the Prophets is made up of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the collection known as the Twelve. The Jewish canon itself makes a clear distinction between Daniel (an apocalyptic book) and the Prophets, although almost all the prophetic books contain some fragments of proto-apocalyptic. This is a significant distinction—the Prophets are primarily concerned not with the cosmic struggle, but with the material and spiritual condition of God's people within human history. Overwhelmingly, the prophets are preoccupied with issues of perverted economic systems, with faithless political systems, with the human suffering they provoke, and with the way that religion and religious leadership is a tool of the powerful and the establishment. The prophets repeatedly attack the beauty and fervour of holiness of the cult because it functions as an anaesthetic to deaden perceptions and at the same time justifies and enforces continuing injustice (denial and rote tradition, as always, hand in hand).

Once again, the prophetic books themselves point in their forms and arrangement to diverse periods and perspectives. But two things characterize almost all the prophetic books—they are made up of oracles of judgement combined with oracles of consolation. The God to whom they witness is a God passionate for justice and holiness but also a God passionate for mercy. In speaking for this God, the latter prophets re-articulate the old laws and traditions, but they also whittle these down to three fundamental principles. The God whose Spirit moves them to speak and to act is a God for whom justice and mercy are the fundamental qualities required of the community, and a God who desires to draw all humanity into full knowledge of that Divine self of justice and mercy. The latter prophets thus provide a significant lens through which the entire Torah must be re-read—whatever its laws and prescriptions, their ultimate aim is not to sustain some religious system (e.g. Amos or Ezekiel), or some political system (Isaiah and Jeremiah), but to enable a community to live in justice, mercy and the knowledge of God's holiness and to draw all the nations of the earth into that transforming vision.

The work of the Spirit in the prophets takes place through their proclamation of the Word of the Lord (whether of judgement or of hope), through their doing of sign-actions, and through their own being and presence. All three of the great latter prophets experience in their own bodies the force of the suffering and unfaithfulness of their people. To carry and make present the work of the Holy Spirit does not lift the prophet out of reality into some ideal plane, but rather plunges him or her ever more deeply into the life of the historical community and its context. The Holy Spirit does not speak "objectively" into a vacuum, but always through a person who embedded in a concrete historical situation, and therefore directly to that concrete historical situation. For this reason, at times the prophets seem almost to be "relativists." At the same time, the shaping of the whole tradition of the Latter Prophets elevates their words and actions beyond the merely historical through a process of gathering and reflection by later generations, in which process the presence, words and actions of the prophets in a particular historical circumstance becomes correlated with the cosmic and ultimate day of the Lord, and the prophets' narrowing of the focus onto the essential elements of justice, mercy and knowledge of God in the here and now is a manifestation of the reality of God's ultimate judgement on and reception of all human work and societies.⁷

7. In the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, Abraham says to the rich man who asks that someone be sent back from the dead to warn his relatives, "They have Moses and the Prophets, what good will it be if someone comes back from the dead?"

The Jesus tradition of the New Testament is modeled on this prophetic tradition. Jesus is the fullness of the presence of God's Spirit incarnate in Human Being and manifests this in his proclamation of the kingdom, in his reiteration of the core tradition of justice and mercy, and in his signs and actions—being tempted, his baptism, healing, miracles, casting out the spiritual powers, eating with the poor, meeting and touching those excluded by religious systems and taboos, and ultimately in the Last Supper, the Cross and the Resurrection. In all these sign actions the being and proclamation of Jesus are inseparable—he is revealed as a Prophet and as more than a Prophet. To depoliticize the Cross and turn it into another religious symbol is fundamentally to deny that the Holy Spirit is present in Jesus Christ, since it is a denial of the entire prophetic tradition and its witness to the work of the Spirit. The sending of the Spirit on the Church enables all followers of Jesus to share in that unity of being and proclamation, and whatever may be said about the life of the church based on the New Testament writings must fulfil this basic requirement—that it is fully consonant with the Prophetic tradition and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

It is important to note that the Former Prophets are not merely a historical narrative of how the Holy Spirit was at work in the life of Israel, or an account that gives background to the emergence of prophetism as a force in ancient Israel, or a narrative in which we see God's judgment and mercy being worked out. In terming these narratives as Prophets, along with the Latter Prophets, whose words confront us much more bluntly with the demand for change in our ways, the canon invites us into a much more complex and nuanced understanding of prophecy. It is easy to see how an oracle of woe or comfort summons us to meet the God of justice or consolation. A "story" or narrative forces us to contemplate all the layers of social and historical exigency, and the ambiguities of human character and role, confronting us with the reality of God's possible judgement on our choices and offering us the hope that if we unpack the story more carefully we will ourselves be enabled to make better and wiser choices.⁸

The Writings

The third body of literature on the Old Testament, known as the Writings, consists of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah (an alternative account of the history of Israel narrated through the perspective of the centrality of the Temple and its rebuilding and restoration in the life of community), the Psalms, the Wisdom books of Proverbs and Job, Daniel (a collection dominated by apocalyptic vision), and the Five Scrolls for special feasts and fasts (Ruth, Esther, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes or Qohelet, Lamentations). All of these books press us again with the need for alternate ways of "knowing" and understanding. In Chronicles we have an account that forces us to consider that the history

8. For example, in the text of 1 Samuel, God rebukes Samuel for his emotional inability to let go of Saul. But the text does not present us this judgement on Samuel in isolation; it presses us to reflect on the entire complex of stories, to explore Samuel's inability to mentor a leader for a task and future different than his own (king as compared to judge and prophet), Samuel's inability to accept and negotiate social and political change. And we begin to contemplate how the judgement extends beyond Samuel's failure, because it becomes the shadow that warps Saul's life (his inability to control his emotions and manage the distinction between the "Spirit" required of a king and the "Spirit" required of a mantic prophet), and Israel's life—social disorder and civil war during the long Saulide decline. But the larger perspective also reminds us that all social groups moving through major periods of change and transition in political and social forms experience ambiguity, tension, and outright failure. So we are invited to reflect on our own role and responsibility in forming leaders for a future we haven't experienced and may not ever know. We are taught to have a larger perspective of mercy in times of change. We are challenged to ask ourselves how we are responding and interacting with social changes we may be living through, and if our choice are giving life or casting the shadow of death over the lives of other people and our community? For the full ambiguity of this consider 1 Sam 13 and 1 Sam 15 in relation to all these questions.

we have accepted as “normative” and true in Joshua through Kings, may be narrated and understood in a different way, and even through a different understanding of what is central to God’s will for the community. Ezra and Nehemiah force us to re-read all the traditions of the deportation period not as final catastrophe but as prelude to a new action of God, and they also confront us with the continued complexity of the life of the faithful community in a world of disruption, anomie, and colonialism.

On the most critical issues of community life and cohesion in Ezra and Nehemiah (exclusion of foreigners), Ruth (whatever its dating) offers a blunt contradiction and draws her story into the liturgical tradition as the paradigm of faithfulness and its capacity to transform the life of the community. In an even more acute way than the Joseph narrative of Genesis, Esther forces us to admit the invisibility and hiddenness of God in history and our own responsibility for choosing to participate in providence through loyalty, integrity, fidelity, and our own wits. Lamentations and the complaint psalms insist that doxology is not adequate for telling the truth about God and our own suffering—even pressing us to accept that God may abandon us so that we no longer in the depths know for sure the validity of any claims about God’s fidelity and willingness to act. Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes, the last books to be accepted into the canon, press us to alternate ways of knowing beyond any other books in the tradition. Song of Songs insists that human sexual love and physical passion are goods beyond the confines of social institutionalization, and that such human sexual love is the only adequate theological language for understanding God’s love and passion for the body of the faithful. Ecclesiastes insists that the only path to God is through doubt, skepticism and deconstruction of all accepted rationalizations of existence into orderly propositions. Many of these texts press us with alternate ways of understanding and knowing in other ways by forcing to listen more clearly to women’s voices and experience as paradigms of faithfulness (Ruth, Esther, Song, Lamentations).

The literature of oppression in Daniel pushes us beyond the tradition of narrative paradigms of faithfulness, beyond the liturgical tradition of prayer, and beyond the visionary parameters of the prophetic into the world of apocalyptic vision—forcing us to learn new conventions for reading and understanding a language of images and symbols, and forcing us to confront the dangers of projecting our own psyche into the cosmic dimension of God’s purpose and activity. Daniel teaches us to distrust ourselves as readers and interpreters, to grapple with the duality of words and images in their specificity and vagueness, but also to appreciate once again the capacity of the visionary, of symbols and images, to tear the veil from the arrogance of human power and propaganda that seek to interject themselves in the place of the One God of heaven and earth.

In giving us a language to speak to God the Psalms place our human journey and our human choices, our suffering, oppression and our joy and deliverance, in the framework of our desire to know God’s way, the hope for the reign of God in the age of the anointed one, the faithfulness of God’s past and present action in creation and salvation, and the knowledge of God’s commandments and instruction as the Spirit’s guide on our journey to justice and holiness.

More than any other of the writings the two great books of the Wisdom tradition, Proverbs and Job (and with them Ecclesiastes) press us to recognize that there is another significant mode of revelation of God’s purpose and will, one which is shared beyond the immediate community of faith with other communities of culture and faith. This is the revelation learned through our own human experience of life and death, of the ordering and patternedness of life, of the consequences embodied in human choices and habits. Proverbs insists that all human experience is a revelation of the Wisdom of God, and that Wisdom is open to everyone who enters its invitation to a path of dialogic and paradoxical interaction with the commonplace. Job reveals to us the decisions of the secret heavenly domain that influence our experience of suffering, allows us to argue all our best religious explanations for human suffering, appals us with Job’s belligerent insistence on maintaining his own total righteousness before God, and finally, having been rebuked in our piety and religiosity by God for not having spoken the truth as did Job, forces us shamefacedly to beg him to pray for us.

The New Testament is also incomprehensible without the Writings. Jesus the Teacher of beatitudes and parables (literally *masbals*, or proverbs) is not only the fulfillment of the Prophetic tradition but the incarnation and living being of Divine Wisdom. And Jesus is also the Anointed One who brings in the reign of God, the *masiah* or Messiah of the Psalms—in him we recognize the fullness of all the prayers of faithful Israel, in the Lord’s prayer we learn the interconnexion of doxology, hope, justice and mercy, and in his crying out of the complaint psalms on the cross Jesus reveals our loneliness, suffering and abandonment as the True Word at the very heart of the Holy Trinity. The structure of Daniel teaches us to distinguish between narratives of the earthly reality of oppression, fortitude and faithful witness and the imaginative visionary symbolic representation of the cosmic and heavenly struggle that lies behind the arrogant opposition of the earthly powers to the One God. Without Daniel we would stand at risk of reading the Revelation to John and confusing realities.

Notes on this hermeneutic framework

- 1) Very little that is articulated in this framework is dependent on theories of the dating or origins of the texts, or of elaborate historical-critical analyses of sources. In the same vein, it is not necessarily inimical to elaboration in relation to such historical information. It does seek to see a historical form of canon as having implications for reading the whole and the parts.
- 2) The framework articulates a “Trinitarian” shape in aspects of the canon, necessary in my view to clarify the essential coherence of the Christian Bible. But in some sense it also insists on an inversion of many typical Christian readings. The Old Testament is not “made true” because of Jesus; Jesus is recognizably the Son of God and the second person of the Trinity because he is fully coherent with the testimony of the canon of the Scriptures (Torah, Prophets and Writings) to what the community has experienced and attests to be true about the God of Israel who creates, saves and speaks the Word of judgement and hope.
- 3) In other contexts I would want to elaborate particular themes, ideas, or motifs. Among these would be: the notion(s) of covenant(s); the centrality of the theme of the redemption of the firstborn as the repayment of the price for freedom; the complex understandings of divine judgement in the prophets particularly in relation to the outworkings of human choices in history; the significance of the face of God and the face of the Other Person; the sustained critique of violence and force and particularly of the powerful attraction violence and force have for religion and religious leaders.
- 4) It is clear that in some sense I see the entire canon as constantly deconstructing itself. In describing this framework I have tried to give some shape to how I see this happening. I understand this process of deconstructing as fundamental to the way the canon in its entirety seeks to teach us to read and understand the world. I also understand this as the way the canon seeks to help us respect its origins as both “Spirit-breathed” and as the work of “human writers”—I experience the canon as richly aware of its own hermeneutic problems.⁹ Fundamentally the canon seeks to teach us that all forms of human production are not trustworthy; there is only One

9. This also points to why a preoccupation with historical origins, authorship, and original/authorial meaning, are of limited interest to the canonical books themselves—they (and their earliest redactors) are already aware of the contingency of everything human. But although it comes close at one or two points, the canon never doubts God.

who is trustworthy, God. God is unknowable and our human testimonies to what we know and experience of God are always fallible and limited by our contingent nature. But for the canon ultimately there is one thing that cannot be deconstructed: the justice and mercy of God.¹⁰

- 5) This framework seeks to articulate both some overarching shape and concerns that frame interpretation of the scriptures, and also to place particular parts of the canon and then particular books of the canon and their unique function within that larger framework. It is obvious that at some level in the scriptures everything is in everything, but that is quite useless, if not downright paralyzing in enabling us to interpret and speak the Word of God faithfully into our own situation and time. It is as paralyzing as the extreme form of understanding the text as deconstructing itself totally—in that world of interpreting the text can say nothing because it contradicts itself constantly. In the world of interpreting where all distinctions are lost, the scriptures simply yield a bland pious pap of generalities and “Judaean-Christian morality”—the world of praise chorus theology and morality. In the world of the biblical text the God we experience in Esther is distinctly a different character from that we experience in Genesis 12-25. The Holy Spirit in Judges manifests its activity differently from the Holy Spirit in Isaiah 40-45. The Letter to the Hebrews presents the saving work of Christ in a distinctly different way from Mark’s gospel. Yet the canon also asserts that it is always and everywhere the same God and the same Jesus Christ and the same Holy Spirit.¹¹

2) What is the relation between interpreters of the past and interpreters in the present?

Effectively then, I have proposed a paradox. If the canon proposes a mode of reading that constantly deconstructs itself, there can be no normative reading. At the same time the very notion and structure of the canon proposes that there must forms of normative reading. This paradoxical issue also extends to the question of normative interpretation, and the interrelation of past and present in interpretation. If past interpretations of the Bible are declared indelibly normative, then effectively the Holy Spirit can no longer speak through the Scriptures, since it contradicts the very principle articulated as normative by the Scriptures, that the scriptures must be reinterpreted for ever generation and that God’s Spirit is free to speak as it needs to in every new historical situation or context.

I understand Moses’ discourse in Deuteronomy 4 to be about precisely this paradox of interpretation:

- the allusion to the Baal of Peor (which evokes the whole ambiguity and problematic of the Balaam episodes [Num. 22-25] in relation to prophecy, the equally ambiguous problematic of the relation between sexuality and

10. The philosopher Jacques Derrida is reputed to have rebuked a graduate student who proclaimed that everything can be deconstructed, by insisting that there was one thing which could not be deconstructed—namely justice. Several of the writings from the final decade of his life deal with two themes—justice and hospitality, which I understand to be his mode of reflection on the ultimate nature of the God of the Bible, hospitality being the most fundamental human practice of mercy.

11. I owe this fundamental perception to the work of Jacques Ellul who puts it a bit more pungently than I in several places. But it also holds a significant place in the work of the theologian Michael Welker, who articulates a version of this issue in his introduction to *What Happens in Holy Communion?* Again, none of this is particularly dependent on a particular understanding of authorship or dating or historical setting. Knowledge of such matters can raise awareness of the uniqueness of the message of each part of the canon and alert us to aspects of historical setting that may give our interpretation more focus and clarity, and it can also contribute to blandness in interpretation. It not an accident that the major insights of most post-eighteenth century commentaries and critical books are: a) few eggs for such big baskets and b) often completely unrelated to the intense methodological activity that preoccupies their writers (e.g. the work of Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza).

religion, the fall into religion from worship of the One God, and the seduction of violence as a means of social and religious control, which violence is also one of the reasons Moses was not allowed to enter the promised land);

- the repeated insistence that the people must not change a word of the commands given to them;
- the repeated warning to “take care and watch yourselves closely;”
- the repeated emphasis on there having been no “form” only a “voice” from within the “fire” on Sinai;
- the evocation of the two tablets which God wrote and Moses’ violence destroyed (there is no form of text, only the word to be remembered and interpreted);
- the repeated emphasis on the danger of idolatry (the desire for the security of the form of fertility and power over anxiety and ambiguity of the empty space between the cherubim in which dwells the Presence);
- and the closure of the chapter with the appointment of cities of refuge (the primal human situation in which our interpretation of what we see and hear is fundamentally flawed—what we think is deliberate murder is in fact accidental killing.)

But set against all this is the equal insistence that the people sustain and exercise the capacity to remember faithfully all they have seen and heard, and to make all of this known to their posterity.¹²

We are obliged by Deuteronomy to remember and interpret to the next generation with all the faithfulness we can muster. We are obliged by Deuteronomy to respect and honour our forbears in the past because they sought to remember and interpret with all the faithfulness they could muster. We are obliged to listen, hear and speak the word the Spirit will give us faithfully into our present. But we aren’t obliged to assume that the past interpreted correctly or infallibly, any more than we can assume that we are interpreting correctly or infallibly, or that generations to come will interpret correctly or infallibly. Idols and religions interpret correctly and infallibly. We worship a God who has no Form, who speaks the Word in Human Form, and who surrounds us and can burn us with the Spirit’s Fire.¹³

12. I understand all discourse about idolatry in the OT (but see also the concluding verse of 1 John) to be essentially about “religion,” or more particularly the constant temptation in ancient Israel but also in the Church to turn the worship of the One Triune God into a religion. Fundamentally the Bible is very clear that idols are just sticks and stone and bits of fabricated metal and are essentially powerless. The passion about idolatry therefore represents a much deeper concern. But almost everywhere in the Bible “religion” and “religious leadership” is shown to be essentially violent and expedient—“It is best that one man should die for the people.” This is not an insight unique to Rene Girard, but already present and evoked repeatedly throughout the Old Testament. From a purely historical and evolutionary perspective, the Deuteronomistic movement, with its brilliant insight into the need to draw together, reinterpret and rearticulate the essential elements of the old Mosaic traditions, also represents the real moment of the formation of what comes to be represented across the canon as Israel’s true faith in the One God, and as such, itself falls into “religion” as manifested in its shadow side of xenophobia, iconoclasm, and violent murder and desecration of human beings and their remains (2 Kings). Nor should we be complacent—our own failure in the interpretation led to the Deuteronomic ideology (idolatry?) becoming a dominant tradition in evangelism, and as noted earlier, we see the afterlife of this dark side of “Deuteronomic religion” in aspects of our own Anglican treatment of First Nations peoples in Canada.

13. The rabbis liken interpretation of the Scriptures to the ecstasy and danger of drawing too near to the fire on Sinai—it can inspire us with Holy Fire and give us insight and life, or it can burn us, as Isaiah also knew.

Thus the interpretive Tradition is always obligated to make itself intelligible to the present—the present owes it no obligation of allegiance, since without making itself intelligible to the present, the Tradition is simply another form without voice, another idol with mouth that does not speak, “eyes that do not see, ears that do not hear...and all those who trust in [it] are like [it].” The present, however, bears the obligation of respecting the tradition for its faithfulness. We may disagree with it, we may find it has nothing useful to say to our situation, but we cannot dismiss it because it, like us, is seeking to be a faithful witness, and in its own time the Spirit spoke through it and kindled fire on earth. But this is precisely why the tradition is so essential and so valuable to us. It is only when we are not bound by it, not caught in the delusion that it is the truth for all time, and open to disagree with it and contradict it, that we are free to learn from it. We don’t learn from the witnesses of the past because they are right; we learn because they are faithful.¹⁴

The Gospel narratives portray Jesus as an interpreter of the Torah and the other Scriptures, and in this regard some parts of the gospel tradition indicate he was called and understood as a “Rabbi,” a distinguished teacher. In these narratives Jesus consistently models several things for interpreters of the tradition. First, he almost always begins by questioning the seeker for advice on the commandments, and inviting them to state for themselves how they interpret the commandments for their own life and situation. The primary interpreter of the Torah’s teaching is the individual seeking to live faithfully in their own unique situation. Further interpretation by Jesus is always the result of further questioning by the interlocutor and almost always concludes by inviting the questioner to make the final decision about the meaning of the commandments.. Secondly, Jesus is portrayed as disputing with other teachers about varying interpretations of the law.¹⁵ Here Jesus evokes other biblical passages or principles as the basis for interpretation—but this is in the context of communal debate and discernment. The secondary interpreter of the law is a community of discernment, but here interpretation must be made coherent and accountable in the context of that community and in relation to the larger context of the scriptures. Further elaborating this are the situations where Jesus actually articulates principles for interpretation. These are invariably aimed at making obedience to the commandments of God possible for the most ordinary faithful, and often allude back the either the foundational form of the prophetic tradition, or to the tradition that summarizes the entire teaching of the Torah in two precepts: love of God and love of neighbour. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practised without neglecting the others.” (Mt. 23:23) “Woe also to you lawyers! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them.” (Lk. 11:46) But we also note that in these and other cases, Jesus articulates the principles of interpretation in the form of prophetic judgments. The purpose of interpretation is to make the teachings of Scripture a vehicle for justice, mercy and knowledge of God, and for those who seek to create elaborate structures and convert the Torah into the burdens of human religion, the judgement of God and of the Human One, the Word Incarnate, is already upon them.

14. I could put this another way and say we pay attention to the tradition because it is the voice of the Communion of Saints and they are not dead but continue to live—but with God. If God had wanted St Augustine to live in our age, God would have willed it so. God did not, and has willed us to live in our age, so God did not intend St Augustine to speak the Word faithfully to the 21st century but instead, gave that responsibility to us. What St Augustine has to offer may or may not be of use in that task, and that’s for us to figure out and decide, because it’s to us, and not to St Augustine, that God has entrusted the present.

15. It is a commonplace of Christian commentary and preaching to speak about how Jesus “breaks” the “law.” Anyone who has spent much time in Christian-Jewish dialogue or with Jewish rabbis or scholars will discover very quickly that the supposed infringements of the “law” all relate to aspects of Pharisaic debate about the best ways to keep the commandments that only much later in the first or even the second century became part of the normative Jewish tradition.

All reading and interpretation of the Bible is of necessity filtered through the preoccupations of the reader's period. There are many values to reading and reflecting on the tradition.

- 1) **It teaches us about the complex dynamic of speaking the Word faithfully (or perhaps failing to speak the whole Word faithfully) into a particular situation**—the dual task of nurturing and sustaining a community in faith, love and hope, and of giving an account to the world of the faith that is in the community in a language (philosophical, pedagogical, literary, political, social, behavioural) that makes faith coherent and credible to the world. It presses us to understand the imagination and flexibility with which the interpreter must interact with human reality.
- 2) **The interpretive tradition of the past, filtered as it is through preoccupations of its period, enables us to examine the dynamic interaction of all the forces that shape human life and culture in a situation for which we do not bear anxiety (as we do for the present).** We learn to see things about our present situation that may be hidden from us, or to which we may be blind.¹⁶ This is not the same thing as imagining that the present could simply be returned to the past and everything would be fixed.
- 3) **The interpretive tradition of the past, filtered as it is through the preoccupations of its period, teaches us about the process of engagement with the scriptures themselves.** Interpretation may be contingent, but it is not random and can never be purely deconstructive. We became more aware of the way the certain questions drive us to certain passages (e.g. questions of theological anthropology, about human purpose and being in creation, always drive us back to Genesis 1-3). We see the process of purposive sifting to find the best scriptural exemplars or responses. We see the necessity and process of creating forms of meta-narrative, and we see how much of scripture all meta-narratives falsify.¹⁷ We see how tendencies, theologies or ideologies of certain parts of scripture can come to dominate a discourse in a particular period because they are a response to the propensities or necessities of the period, until the discourse becomes twisted and overbalanced, and how that overbalance leads to lameness or paralysis for future generations of the faithful. We see how certain threads or veins of thought come to form the warp and woof of a fabric or the lifeblood of a body of interpretive thought that has come to be identified as normative.
- 4) **The interpretive tradition of the past, filtered as it is through the preoccupations and presuppositions of its period, teaches about the fallibility and limitations of all interpretive work, including our own.** Among the greatest interpreters, this level of reflective self-consciousness is eminently present.¹⁸ Until modern fundamentalism all serious interpreters have been aware of issues of textual variants and criticism, aware of confusions and contradictions within and among the texts,¹⁹ and aware of the need for and serious limitations of their historical

16. For example, reading Clement of Alexandria, a brilliant teacher with an uncanny sense of how to integrate Christian thought and articulate it in the context of contemporary philosophical language and concerns, also confronts one with a man who had a prurient fixation on sexuality. Then one contemplates the life of his even more brilliant student Origen and the forces that warped Origen's own understanding of his body, and ultimately brought his writings into question.

17. Augustine's *City of God* is the classic example of this in its greatest strength (simply consider its historical impact) and its greatest weakness (simply look at how much of the Bible he omits).

18. For instance Origen's comments on Matthew 18:21.

19. The ancient rabbis, for instance, discuss the fact that events are recounted out of their temporal order in the texts of the Torah. Where a John Spong assumes this is the result of stupidity and error, the Rabbis assume it is the result of clever insight and intentional pedagogy.

knowledge about the text and its cultural and social background.²⁰ Sometimes ancient interpreters can produce in us startling moments of cognitive dissonance on territory where we feel most secure.²¹

It is about the minutiae of cultural and group conduct that the most elaborate discussions and disputes frequently emerge, largely because these aspects of culture are the most easily assumed. They involve the everyday, our most typical social interactions, and are trained and socialized into our patterns of thought from birth by inculcation, ritual, religion, and embodiment in conventions and taboos of law and behaviour. But these are also the areas where cultural difference, ethnic difference, and temporal distance, frequently make us most aware of the shortcomings of past interpreters. They are also areas where easily trusting interpreters of the past will most betray us. The most fundamental of these minutiae are those relating to the forms and structures of family life, marriage and sexual behaviour. But two other issues also grip us here. These are also the areas in which we have the most difficulty escaping our own parantocentrism, our preoccupation with our own present as normative for all time [being no different than most of our precursors in this regard]. They are also the areas where our first instinct when we move away from our parantocentrism and begin to become critical of our own time is to latch onto some idealized moment of the interpretive past when everything was “normal” or some projected “ideal” that usually refers to itself as “biblical morality.” Thus it is in this area most that past readings and interpretations of the scriptures may be of value but cannot be accepted as authoritative.²²

3) *Is there some sort of achievable objective understanding of the biblical text?*

What I have indicated about my hermeneutic framework to this point would indicate that I do not think there is an achievable “objective” understanding of the biblical text. What then is the Church’s authority in interpretation? This is what I understand to be the focus of the question and response in the Supplementary Instruction (BCP 1959). “*Question.* Where then is the Word of God to be found in all its fulness? *Answer.* In Jesus Christ, his only Son, who was made man for us and for our salvation.” There is only one authoritative Word of the Triune God, and it has been

20. One of the best expositions of the complete range of knowledge required for interpretation is in Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana*. But in *On Christian Doctrine* Augustine ends with a set of questions that seems almost post-modern, albeit articulated in the frame of the criteria for authentic and authoritative teaching and preaching in the Church—namely the issue of the person and being of the interpreter and their moral and ethical formation in relation to their credibility. Feminist and post-colonial thought, criticism and interpretation simply push the same questions well beyond where Augustine might have taken them into the public realm of the entire history of human thought and production. But Augustine also knew something about being one of the colonized and about the delusions of high culture on objectivity and univocality.

21. Again, Origen. Where a modern interpreter (schooled by the refined techniques of careful historical exegesis) assumes a level of historicity to the accounts of the entry of Jerusalem, Origen commences by pointing out that the story simply cannot have any plausible basis in historical fact, and proceeds to understand it as an allegory.

22. One has only, however to look in the Recognitions of Clement 9:19ff at the long refutation of astrology with its detailed laying out of social, marital, and sexual customs across a wide range of countries and ethnic groups, to realize that some ancient Christians were considerably more aware and non-anxious about sexual and gender custom divergence than many contemporary well-educated Anglicans. And all prefaced by, “There are, in every country or kingdom, laws imposed by men, enduring either by writing or through custom, which no one easily transgresses.” This material and its parallels includes awareness that there are cultures where same-sex marriages are expected, normal, and required for social honour.

spoken in Jesus Christ. In interpreting the scriptures we can seek to testify faithfully and truthfully to that Word, and the faithful may indeed do so in their generation. It is this faithful and truthful witness to the Word spoken in Jesus Christ that constitutes that Church speaking and interpreting with authority.²³ But when the Church speaks about and interprets the scriptures at any moment claiming to speak with authority for all time, it increasingly runs the risk of ceasing to witness faithfully to the Word of God spoken in Jesus Christ, because it has abandoned Jesus Christ and the way of the Cross for the way of power. The Church has ceased to witness to Jesus Christ, the one True Word and become simply another religion. “*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*” In Matthew 20 even two blind men by the side of the road witness more faithfully to Jesus than James and John, his disciples who seek to sit in the place of power and authority, and their fellow disciples who then resent and dispute with them.

To say that there is not and can be no objective interpretation of the scriptures is not to say that the faithful can never find any common ground or agreement, or shared understanding of the meaning of the scriptures. The Instruction also poses two other questions: “*Question. Why ought you to read God’s holy Word, the Bible? Answer. Because it tells how God has made himself known to man; and how we may come to know him, and find salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ in the fellowship of his Church. Question. What does the Church teach about the Bible? Answer. The Bible records the Word of God as it was given to Israel, and to his Church, at sundry times and in divers manners; and nothing may be taught in the Church as necessary to man’s salvation unless it be concluded or proved therefrom.*” While it is attractive to imagine the whole notion of “proving” offers a finality and authority about interpretation, in fact it evokes precisely the issue of the contingency of all interpretation. The notion of “proving” summons both the resources of the tradition (the dialogue among the faithful over the generations, and what can and cannot be agreed from that dialogue), but it also summons the failure of the tradition (all that may have been considered to be agreed and proven that has come to be seen over time as misguided or false), and with Deuteronomy it presses the responsibility of the Tradition to articulate itself clearly in new times and circumstances, not to past standards of proof, but to the standards of the present.²⁴ Just because the faithful of the past may have

23. Thus within limits I can assent to the comments of the Archbishop of Canterbury in his Advent letter of 2007: “The common acknowledgment that we stand under the authority of Scripture as ‘the rule and ultimate standard of faith,’ in the words of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral; as the gift shaped by the Holy Spirit which decisively interprets God to the community of believers and the community of believers to itself and opens our hearts to the living and eternal Word that is Christ. Our obedience to the call of Christ the Word Incarnate is drawn out first and foremost by our listening to the Bible and conforming our lives to what God both offers and requires of us through the words and narratives of the Bible. We recognise each other in one fellowship when we see one another ‘standing under’ the word of Scripture. Because of this recognition, we are able to consult and reflect together on the interpretation of Scripture and to learn in that process. Understanding the Bible is not a private process or something to be undertaken in isolation by one part of the family. Radical change in the way we read cannot be determined by one group or tradition alone.” This statement represents a modest and healthy shift away from the Windsor Report, although it still seems to me slightly problematic in that it highlights the “book” more than the person of Jesus Christ as the one whom we follow and under whose authority we stand.

24. I understand this to be the import of Richard Hooker’s insistence that even positive commands of scripture may be set aside if times and circumstances alter, or the fulfilling of a positive command can be seen in another set of circumstances to be doing harm or injury (Lawes III.10). But other aspects of this discussion also underlie the tremendous weight he places on the narrative of Acts 15, to which he returns at several points. It is precisely in Acts 15 that the issues of the contingency of interpretation, a body of agreed understandings, and the need of the Church to speak faithfully into its new situation come to a nexus.

agreed does not mean the faithful of the present have to agree with them. Both the scriptures and the tradition do not lose their capacity to teach us simply because we think they are wrong or we disagree with them. The bush that burns with the fire that burnt on Sinai and at Pentecost burns without being consumed. But if, out of a desire to accede to their authority or in passive obedience, we agree with the scriptures or the tradition when in fact we disagree, then we are a city divided in ourselves, and we cease to be faithful witnesses to the Word of God, because we have allied ourselves with the diabolos (the confuser), who loves authority and power because it is the illusion of the real work of the Word (Luke 4).

The question posed in the Instruction is not: “Why ought you at all times to agree with God’s holy Word, the Bible?” The question is (correctly): “Why ought you to read God’s holy Word, the Bible? *Answer.* Because it tells how God has made himself known to man; and how we may come to know him, and find salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ in the fellowship of his Church.”

2. Human Sexuality—Alternative Perspectives on Genesis 1 and 2 as a Foundational Framework

I now come directly to the broad issue of human sexuality and the interpretation of the scriptures. Several matters relate this question: foundational questions of scriptural anthropology; the place of the “fall” in understanding the scriptures and sexuality; the problem of patriarchy and the scriptures; the portrayal of marriage in the Bible; marriage as a changing social institution in the Bible; same-sex relations in the Bible; principles relating to human sexual intimacy.

Genesis 1 and 2: Alternative Perspectives on Foundational Theological Anthropology²⁵

Many classic approaches make the opening chapters of Genesis foundational to an understanding of an understanding of the purpose of human beings within creation. Commentators have seen them as contributing to an understanding of work (for example, in recent Catholic teaching), language, sin and violence, the relative roles of men and women in society and family (compare *Promise Keepers* and Phyllis Trible), and of sexuality and marriage. In particular many would appeal to Genesis as setting forth a sort of “natural law” that male-female relationships in marriage are foundational to all created and social order. I think, however, it is possible to read and apply these chapters somewhat differently in exploring foundational issues as they relate to gender and sexuality.

25. This is a version of an article which appeared in *Encountering God*, Volume 3 in the Primate’s Theological Commission Workbook series published in 2004. Much of the material was presented first to a National Church Consultation on Sexuality in January 2001, and I want to thank those who offered suggestions and feedback both at that event, in subsequent discussions with the Primate’s Theological Commission, and then when this material was presented as a lecture at Christ Church, Edmonton in March 2005. In particular I want to acknowledge Dr Hanna Kassis of Vancouver, who offered helpful (and valid) critical comment on an earlier draft relating to my handling of an item of Hebrew vocabulary, and whose vigorous disagreement with my conclusions clarified for me a range of hermeneutic issues. I re-present this material here because I see it as essential framework which cannot be treated simply by allusion.

The first two chapters of Genesis present us texts that stand in a dialogical relationship that presents to us a tension in our understanding of human beings and their purpose. The dialogue and tension appears in both form and details of language and theme. Contemporary German theologian Michael Welker emphasizes the importance for theology of living with and holding on to such tensions and diversities of scriptural witnesses, without smoothing differences over or arguing them away. The precise **differences** in the testimonies of faith from the past are fully a part of revelation.

Liturgy, Inevitability and Fundamental Human Drives

Genesis 1 is a ritual text. The world comes into being through a series of repeated word actions, matched by the shape of the text—it is a song or a dance punctuated by a series of refrains. (Genesis 1 is danced in some Jewish synagogues on the festival Simhat Torah.) The world arises from the *tohu wabohu*, the primordial chaos, through a series of recurrent commands uttered by God—“Let there be...” By the end of Genesis 1, the entire universe has come into being, ordered, fertile, reproducing itself in an endless chain of being, a marked series of complexities. What is presented here is the world of nature that replenishes itself in the same ritual, cyclical, mechanistic manner—birth, death, the recurrent seasons, the laws of physics.

The creation of human beings in 1:26-28 appears as climax of the ritual; in Hebrew style what comes latest is usually marked as superior to what comes first. The creation of humans is not, however, the true climax of Genesis 1, but rather the creation of the Sabbath. Nonetheless, the human beings, created in the divine likeness, are one culminating work of creation. In Genesis 1 they are created as sexually differentiated, *zakar unqebâ*, male and female (literally, “grooved”). God blesses them with a blessing that on superficial reading seems innocent and in line with previous blessings in the sequence. “Be fruitful, and multiply and fill the earth, and subjugate it, and rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the heavens, and over all living things that creep on the earth” (1:28). God goes on to say, “See, I give you the seed-bearing plants upon all the earth and fruit trees with seed-bearing trees for food. And for all living things of the earth, and for all birds of the skies, and for everything that creeps on the earth, in which there is the breath of life, theirs are the green plants for food” (1:29).

Beneath this lies a more disturbing picture, however, of the place of humans in relation to creation. The Hebrew root *KBŠ*, rendered here as “subjugate,” carries in virtually all instances of its use the sense of the seizing by violence and force of land or people for physical and economic subjugation and slavery. So too, the verbal root *RDH*, usually rendered as “rule over” has the more pointed sense of “to dominate.” Thus in Genesis 1 humans are created in the image of “gods” with uncontrolled power to dominate and forcibly overpower the creation. So too, all the fruits of the trees and plants are for human consumption. And the sole purpose of humans is presented as reproduction—repeated with three different synonyms culminating in “fill the earth.”

I understand this opening account of the creation with its liturgical shaping and these initial blessings/commands to be opening up for our reflection a fundamental biblical and theological understanding about human drives and needs, around which, I would argue, the totality of the remainder of the Bible unfolds in a sort of critical dialectic. Humans have a fundamental drive, or a need, for power. Humans have a fundamental drive to survive physically, a need to eat and consume. And thirdly, humans have a fundamental drive to self-transcend, to out-exist time and mortality, expressed primarily as a need to reproduce, to procreate. Genesis 1 sets these foundational premises up by drawing in particular on at least one piece of language, this root *KBŠ*, that emanates from its encounter with Babylonian cosmology and theology.

Despite God’s seeing of it all and judging it “very good” (1:31), I think Genesis 1 should rightly give us pause. If it were our only biblical creation story, we would have a theology in which humans function as copulation machines,

consuming all the green on the surface of the earth, and driven by the will for power, to control at whatever cost of violence. And, I would suggest, on the Sabbath as God rests, it gives the Holy One pause as well, because Genesis 2 picks up and presents a radically different understanding of what it means to be human part of God's purpose in creation.

Narrative, Unpredictability, and the Mystery of Identity and Relationship

Genesis 2 presents us a totally different type of text in form and details. Genesis 1 was predictable and repetitive, a liturgical and poetic celebration of the power of the "word" to unleash, differentiate and order the universe. Genesis 2 is "story," a narrative in which the Lord God appears as a potter or a sculptor, and finally as a designer and builder. The story unfolds in action and conversation. Where in Genesis 1 the divine "words" are hurled out into the emptiness of a black-hole universe, in Genesis 2 there is negative judgment, doubt, questioning, command, error, exploration, and recognition. Initiative passes from player to player in the story, and like all stories there are moments of crisis that demand ingenuity, and lead to new narrative possibilities.

In Genesis 2 God sculpts (Hebrew root *YŠR*, "to form, shape as a potter") the *'adam* or "earth-creature" from dirt or mud (*'adamâ*). Phyllis Tribble and many others (including some ancient rabbis) have noted that the creature is not, in the earliest stages of the story, gender defined. In this the narrative stands immediately in contrast with the creation of humans in Genesis 1. The "mudling" becomes alive through the intimate in-pouring of divine breath—the sharing of the divine nature here is not "image" or "likeness" here, but fragility and interdependence.

Then the Lord God creates a garden, and places the "mudling" in it for a purpose—to till and to tend it. These Hebrew roots, *BD* and *ŠMR*, have more common meanings of "to serve" and "to guard." This, from the outset Genesis 2, presents the purpose of the human being, the "earth creature," in relation to the world in a very different way from Genesis 1. Serving is the opposite of ruling or dominating, and guarding is something very different from violating or exploiting. So too, in the whole realm of food and consumption. In Genesis 2 the Lord God lays a command on the human, "You may eat of every tree of the garden, and/but from the tree of knowledge, good and evil, you shall not eat from it..." (2:16). Genesis 1 presents a world in which all plants and green things are available for untrammelled consumption; here in Genesis 2, there is a limit to what the human may consume.

Limit as Foundational to Biblical Ethics

This notion of limit is foundational in understanding biblical ethics and law. If in Genesis 2 the first thing that characterizes the fullness of humanity is its *responsibility and obligation* toward the rest of creation, the second thing indicated in this moment of commandment is that the fullness of our human nature is realized in our willingness to choose to *limit* ourselves. The ambiguous sense of the *waw* conjunction in the commandment points us to both aspects of the meaning of this limit. Typically, Genesis 2:16 is rendered oppositionally: "You may eat of every tree of the garden, **but** from the tree of knowledge, good and evil, you shall not eat from it..." The passage can also be read with the more usual simple meaning of *waw* as continuative: "You may eat of every tree of the garden, **and** from the tree of knowledge, good and evil, you shall not eat from it..." The one points us to limit as a divine setting apart by command to be obeyed. The second reading points us to the possibility of human initiative in taking on limit. But this possibility of human initiative in taking on limit is to let go of **one's own** power and possibility for the continued existence and potentiality of **the other**—be it the trees in creation, be it knowledge, or the possibility of life against death for the other. The fullness of our humanity is thus recognized not in achieving our own strength

or potential but in weakness and self-emptying, whether we do this in response to divine command, or whether we choose on our own to take on limits to make room for the rest of creation.²⁶ Having limned the reality of being fully human as *responsibility, obligation and willingness to self-limit*, the text now takes us to a new place and brings us to a startling juncture. In the next episode, the emergent purpose or measure of our full humanity becomes *partnership* and *relationship*.

Partnership and Relationship

The Lord God makes the first negative judgment on the creation—a judgment all the more striking because it stands in radical contrast with Genesis 1’s reiteration of “It was good...” “The Lord God said, ‘Not-good—the earth creature being alone; I will make for it an *‘ezer kenegdo*’” (2:18). This is a crucial moment for our understanding of the purpose of human beings, and for the construction of any theological anthropology. First, it is *being alone* that the Lord God judges to be the “not-good” in creation as it stands. Thus the emergent purpose of humans is *partnership* and *relationship*. Furthermore, the divine intention is that humans will have a partner who is an *‘ezer kenegdo*, a “helper who is like its *neged*.” *Neged* in Hebrew has shades of meaning. The helper could be “like its opposite” or “as someone who will oppose it” or “as someone who will be over against it.” Within that range of meanings, however, sex or gender is not a consideration—the *‘ezer kenegdo* is any helper who could fulfil the role of *oppositional partnership*. This reading is sustained, in my view, by the rest of the narrative in Genesis 2 where sexuality and procreation never appear as a purpose for the earth creature and its eventual partner. This stands in stark contrast to Genesis 1:28 where it is presented as the first and (almost) sole purpose of the humans.

In the unfolding of the narrative from this point onward the following details and dynamics should be emphasized. First the responsibility for identifying the partner rests with the *‘adam*, with the individual human being itself. The divine assumes that the human will choose the creature that is its *‘ezer kenegdo*. For the Lord God of this narrative it is not a matter of predestination or predetermination but one of genuine surprise and curiosity—“Then the Lord God sculpted from the dirt each living thing of the field, and each bird of the skies [all attempts to produce a suitable *‘ezer kenegdo*], and brought it to the earth creature to see: [and then in the form of a question] What will he call it?” (2:19). Here too, we see the contrast between Genesis 1’s portrayal of humans in the role of “dominator” of creation, and, in Genesis 2, human beings as “namer” of creation—to name is to enter into relation, not as an act of objectification, but of seeking the genuine identity and subjectivity within each new thing the Lord God shapes and leads forth. These are themes identified and discussed elsewhere in the history of interpretation, but I note them again in this context as significant elements of contrast between these opening chapters of Genesis and the divergent anthropologies they project.

This leads to a surprise for the Lord God—none of the creatures to date is recognized as the *‘ezer kenegdo*. What then takes place is, in the ordering of the entirety of these two narratives, the final and culminating act of creation—no new creature follows this last mysterious act. The Lord God, having cast a spell-like sleep upon the earth creature, must remove a portion of its physical body, and engage in a new mode of activity. The Hebrew verbs now used derive from the root BNH, “to build,” thus reflecting the shift in level of complexity, skill, and ingenuity

26. Again, it is essential to note that it is not the imposing of limits on *other* people so that they meet our expectations or conform to our desires to restrict them that represents this full humanity in the taking on of limit, but *our own* willingness to take on limits vis à vis humans and the natural order. At its most extreme see Matthew 7, Luke 6, John 8, Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 10, James 2, on humans judging others.

demanded by the task of producing the *‘ezer kenegdo*. The Lord God constructs a woman (*’iššâ*, the standard word for woman). Thus (and some ancient Jewish rabbis read this way), the culminating and most complex act of creation is that of creating “woman.” When the earth creature awakes, the Lord God brings the new creature before it. The earth creature breaks into poetry:

Here at last! Bone from my bone; flesh from my flesh,
This one will be called *’iššâ*, because out of *’iyš* this one was taken (2:23).

Only in the final verse do common terms for “man” and “woman” appear. Even the wordplay is open to another reading. In the Hebrew language, *’iššâ* (woman) is not derived or taken from *’iyš* (man) at all. They come from different roots, and insofar as there were understood structures of grammar and language in ancient Israel, this would have been known. The wordplay is of another order, that of sound. *’Iyš* and *’iššâ* differ only by the small sound the jaw makes when it drops with a gasp of recognition and surprise. And so to it is not the gender or sex of the partner that is fundamentally at stake, but the moment of finding, recognizing and knowing the one with whom one can be in relationship.²⁷

Thus Genesis 2 turns to gendered language but also word play at its conclusion—fundamentally we are told the name of the *cezer kenegdo* is *’issha*—the name the human gives itself differentiated by only one short gasp of discovery and joy. That these are also gendered terms points no longer first to reproduction, but to the social and relational roles of human differentiation. Even more extremely the text insists that this process of finding the *‘ezer kenegdo* is not about marriage and the family, but about the opposite—the text states that its fundamental purpose is the destruction of marriage and the family—“for this reason an *’ish* abandons father and mother to cleave to its *’issha* and the two become one flesh.” Family and clan are not ultimate goods, but rather the ultimate good is entering into relationship with the unique other that creates the possibility of true human community and fruitfulness. Genesis 2 points already to the hope of Revelation and the affirmation of Jesus in the gospels—at the Lamb’s wedding banquet there is no marrying or giving in marriage, only the feast at which all peoples, languages and tongues rest in an eternal Sabbath of justice and peace and all creation is bound forever in love with the God who created it, saves it, and enlivens and enlightens it.

Furthermore, the text nowhere sets up structures of hierarchy as normative in the created order. All these are features of the order described in Genesis 4, the disordered and confused world following the eating from the tree in the middle of the garden. It is in the “fallen” world that the emphasis of the text focuses increasingly on patterns and structures of hierarchical, rigidly fixed heterosexual interactions.

The Relationship between Genesis 1 and 2—Alternative Ways of Reading

Finally, a comment on the two narratives taken together. I have identified the way in which Genesis 1 conceals a mechanistic world of constant reproduction, consumption and uncontrolled violence and power—associated with the drives and control and ordering which we might term the order of necessity. I think Genesis 2 can be read in three ways.

In a first approach, the second creation story can be read as *complementary* to the first. Seen in this way, Genesis 2 builds on the presuppositions of Genesis 1, nuancing and reshaping them. This is a mode of reading which would

27. The conventional reading (Trible too notes this shift) is to see this as the beginning of “genderedness” in the text. I press on this issue of wordplay, because I think the conventional reading is too simplistic. The very fact that the text plays a word joke tells us that it intends to press us beyond the conventional frame within which we use and understand words and ideas. Jokes by their nature defamiliarize, open the doorway to the impossible or the improbable and momentarily make us see them as reality—and we laugh. *’Iyš* and *’iššâ*—who knows what their names really were? Pete and Pat? Abe and Abbie? Jean and Gene? Franky and Frankie? Michael and Michal? Or Adam and Steve as some fundamentalists like to suggest?

have been very much part of the tradition up to the nineteenth century. In this mode of reading, Genesis 2, although it doesn't speak about sexuality, is building on a sexually differentiated normative world laid out in Genesis 1. I think this type of complementary reading as a foundational anthropology underlies the presuppositions of many more conservative Christians, and for that matter, of most of the Christian tradition, when applied to our understandings about human sexuality, marriage and human relationships. To read in this way involves, however, a blurring, or reading over, of the strong differences and distinctions between the two chapters of text.

Secondly, we can construe Genesis 2 as a *critique* of Genesis 1. In this critique:

- the domination and forcible subjugation of the earth is challenged by a creation story in which the purpose of humans from the outset is to serve and guard the rest of the creation;
- the right of humans to unlimited consumption of the green things of the earth is challenged by a creation story in which divine command sets a limit on what can be consumed;
- the purpose of human beings as purely sexually beings meant only for reproducing and filling the earth is challenged by a story which virtually omits sexuality and gender as a category, and focuses on the need for suitable partnership and relationship, not as designated by God but as recognized and named for the self by the human individual, as the primary purpose of being human.

To be completely human is to find the one other human who can make us speak in poetry and puns, whose nakedness makes us know innocence and naivety and shamelessness. But fundamentally, the corrective of this creation story is to insist that entering into relationship (with the earth, with our own greed and desire, with other creatures, and with other humans) is the overwhelming end and purpose of human beings.

There is a third way of reading the chapters in relation to one another which builds on the second. I noted above the principal of Hebrew narrative that what comes later is more important than, or more climactic or significant than what comes earlier. On this reading, Genesis 2 is not merely a challenge to, or critique of, Genesis 1. Because it comes after the account of Genesis 1, its deliberate emphasis on *relationship* as the primary category of human meaning and purpose, *supercedes* that of Genesis 1, not merely qualifying it, but overriding it. In this theological anthropology the purpose and meaning of human person is not circumscribed by the necessity of male-female sexuality and the necessity for procreation. Our purpose is to live in relationship with our own unique *'ezer kenegdo*. God trusts us to know and recognize that person, whomever s/he may be.

3. Human Sexuality—Re-reading Disordered Creation in Genesis 3 and 4 and its Implications

Genesis 3 and 4—Disordered Creation

We now come to the texts that limn in narrative form the event which has come to be known in theological terms as the “fall.” Unquestionably the texts intend to portray a growing situation of disorder and rupture—but this is frequently portrayed as a much less complex matter than close reading of the texts themselves allows. There is also a significant difference in the way Jewish and Christian tradition read these events. For Judaism they are certainly serious and mark a huge rupture with the Holy One, but the narrative is more often seen as illustrative of the reality of the “good inclination” and the “bad inclination” in all human beings, and the responsibility required to exercise the freedom of choice God has given humanity. Christian thought is deeply invested in extreme interpretations of the

“fall” since the more cataclysmic the “fall” can be portrayed as the easier it is to see the Incarnation as some necessary sort of extreme Divine mopping-up job.

The more closely one reads the narratives of Genesis 3, the more difficult it is to identify with any precision a single moment which is the “fall.”

The Error of Sexual Complementarity as Constitutive to the Fall

The narrative begins with another word play. Genesis 2 ends with the *'adam* and the *'ezer kenegdo* recognizing one another as *'ish* and *'issab*. Genesis 2:25 tells us they were a pair, *'arumim* together and not mutually embarrassed or shamed. This term means “naked” but its root is a homonym with another with the meanings “innocent” or “naïve,” moving into another range of meaning completely as “subtle.” The very next verse shifts our attention to the creature called the *nabaš*, “the snake” which it describes as *'arum* beyond all the creatures of the field. The same adjective is applied to humans and snake, and we are clearly again in the world of deliberate word play intended to create ambiguity. The dominant translation traditions ride over this moment of identity between humans and snake, and make the humans naked, innocent or naïve and the snake crafty or subtle.²⁸ But this assertion of identity in *'arum*-ness between humans and snake is narratively significant for the story because it points from the outset to a mistake in categories which underlies all that follows. Why does the *'issba* enter into a conversation with the snake at all? Why does the snake suppose the *'issba* is an appropriate conversation partner? The narrative is more logical than the translators and theologians—it sees the need for genuine logical necessity. “Nakedness” appears to be the commonality that permits relationship. But when we read this detail of the text, we realize then that it also calls into question a fundamental assumption that we, the snake and the *'issba* share. What is “obvious”—that the physical bits correspond, and that that they are somehow matching or complementary to the eye or to our first perception, is not necessarily the correct measure for entering into relationship, for assessing the appropriateness of the one to be *'ezer kenegdo*. Is this initial error in categories the actual moment of the “fall”? If so, and because it centres around the question of nakedness which also in some way points to our creation as sexual beings, then it opens up for question all theories that seek to correlate notions of the “obvious” or “normal” and relational appropriateness. Relationship requires more than sexual complementarity to be appropriate—after all, the snake is naked and seems like a phallus. If simple complementarity isn't the measure, then “normal” may be a much wider range of possibilities than we originally contemplated. But at the same time, the error in categories also opens up the issue of the “inappropriate” in relationships—they require more *'arum*-ness (in all its senses) than simply checking out the attractions of the other's *'arum*.²⁹

28. There are two genuinely different roots at play, but the forms generated from them are homonyms. The differentiated reading based on the traditions of vocalization has a long and genuine history, but the sounded text still points us back to the fundamental multi-vocal sense of the text.

29. This is not all some post-modern fantasy on my part. There is a long interpretive tradition that understands the snake to have had sexual relations with the *'issab*. I simply seek here to press some of the issues involved in the implicit and often under-read sexual implications of the story. At several levels Genesis 3 and 4 are clearly concerned with the “fall” and human sexuality as one of the aspects of our nature that is affected. Readings that stop at the notion that the story is simply about some “taboo” on snake religions or against women having sex with snakes are less astute than Balaam's ass. Perhaps the greatest representation of this scene is that of Gislebertus at Autun (available at the Web gallery of Art <http://www.wga.hu/>). Unlike most representation Gislebert captures the sheer sensuality involved. The woman is portrayed in horizontal position rather than the usual vertical; the snake is implied but not clearly distinguishable from the vegetation and the woman seems almost entangled with the natural world and with the snake. On the one side her delicate fingers (echoing the amazing needlelike finger of the angel waking the sleeping wise men elsewhere at Autun) touch her lips as if to signal the incipient fall of language, on the other hand she languorously grasps the fruit of the tree—the other tree, not the one in the middle that now bisects her life and her physical being. Unlike the wise men, Eve's eyes are open.

The range of meanings of *'arum* also opens up considerable ambiguity about all that happens subsequently. If all the players are simply “innocent” or “naïve,” then is this just a story about children at play that has led to disastrous consequences? In this light the terrible weight of guilt laden upon our forbears by the tradition seems unrealistic if not unjust. If we are to understand that all three characters are “subtle” or “shrewd,” then we move somewhere into the realm of imagining them as already, even at the moment of their creation, as in some way “depraved” and “flawed.” But how then can they be responsible if, after all, there was only an evil inclination and no real possibility of choice?

Language and Theology as a Constitutive Element in the Fall

The snake then engages the *'issah* in a theological discussion. It poses a question relating to the interpretation of what God has said regarding eating and the trees in the garden? Some might see the moment of the “fall” as this—it is wrong ever to ask questions or attempt to clarify the meaning of what God has said. But equally, one might see the “fall” as resting in the snake’s interference in what is appropriately only the woman’s business—namely how she chooses to interpret the divine directive.³⁰ Some would see it as resting on a shrewd restating of the first part of the original Divine command, “From every tree of the garden you shall eat, yes, eat, but from...” in the question forms as “Did the Lord God command, ‘You shall not eat from every tree of the garden?’” On this view, the fall is manifest first in language—its capacity for ambiguity, the way in which it creates aporia of uncertainty and the need for further interpretation, the way the Word of g\Grace is so easily twisted by the innocent, the naïve and the shrewd into a path to destruction.

There is an overwhelming tendency in the tradition to read this text from a misogynistic perspective. In this conventional reading, the snake speaks to the *'issah* because she is weaker and more easily led astray than the *'adam*. But there is a very strong minority tradition, especially among the Rabbis, that reads this in a very different way. In Hebrew narrative, what is enumerated or recounted last is understood to be the most significant, most important, or crowning event.³¹ In this view, the final act of creation is the creation of the *'issah* to be the *'ezer kenegdo* for the *'adam*—thus the *'issah* is the pinnacle of creation and the most superior being in it. The *'issah* is therefore the most obvious and only truly suitable party to be engaged in a theological discussion, and taking the larger cosmological view that the purpose of the “Evil One” in the discussion is to disrupt the whole of creation, that disruption will only be effective if brought about through drawing the best theologian into error.

The original divine command runs: “From every tree of the garden you shall eat, yes, eat; and/but from the tree of knowing good and evil, you shall not eat from it, for on the day you eat from it you shall die, yes die.” The difficulty is that when Genesis 2:9 tells us about the creation of the trees in the garden, we are told that there are “the trees beautiful for looking at and good for food, and the tree of life in the midst of the garden, *and/that is* the tree of knowing good and evil.” Are there two trees in the middle of the garden (one of life and one of knowing) or one tree in the middle of the garden that is both of life and knowing, or is there the tree of life in the middle of the

30. One thinks of Jesus responding to a questioner, “Why do you ask me? There is no one good but God. You know what the commandments are—how do you interpret them?”

31. Quite legitimately, my feminist friends might say that this is simply another version of the male projection of woman as goddess or whore, and they are right. Within the tradition though, this is a voice that I think seeks to read woman as an equal partner and one of immense dignity, and it makes more sense within the conventions of the narrative than the misogynist projection. This voice in the tradition represents a serious attempt to read the *'issah* from a pre-fall perspective, rather than from the post-fall perspective which has to be misogynistic because it participates unrepentantly in the fall.

garden, and then another tree somewhere else in the garden that is the prohibited tree of knowing? These ambiguities are present in the text of Genesis 2, and now begin to influence this story.³² The 'issab replies, "From the fruit of the garden-trees, we may eat. And/but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, the Lord God said, 'You shall not eat from it and you shall not touch it, lest you die.'" First we note that the 'issab has over-interpreted (in fact made a hedge around the law in good rabbinic fashion). The command to the 'adam was not to eat from the fruit of the "tree of knowing good and evil;" the 'issab includes the additional restriction that to "touch it" is also prohibited and will lead to death. Secondly, like a good theologian the 'issab quashes the ambiguity about the trees by referring to the prohibited tree not functionally but positionally.

The narrative, as it unrolls through chapters two and three also opens the question of whether the 'issab ever actually knew the divine command correctly? Nowhere does the text tell us that the 'adam told her the command or in what form it was relayed. And now, the snake responds to the 'issab, "You will not die, yes not die." It seems like a bold-faced lie, until we realize that the 'issab has stipulated the tree in the middle of the garden, which is in the first description of the garden stipulated to be the tree of life. What the snake says first is factually true—there is no evidence even in the divine command that the tree of life is prohibited. Then the snake says, "Because God is constantly aware on the day you eat from it then your eyes will be opened and you will become like God/gods constantly aware of good and evil." So which tree is *it*—the tree of life in the middle of the garden? The tree of knowing good and evil?

Part of the problem is that every verse, every word, adds to the layers of confusion and ambiguity—the text is itself a sort of *mise-en-abyme* of disruption. Now suddenly before even touching or eating the fruit of any tree, we hear that the 'issab "sees"—her eyes are already opened to the fact that the tree was good for eating, was attractive to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable for causing understanding (Which tree? The suffix could indicate either one).³³ The 'issab takes from its fruit (which tree?), and eats, and gives it also to her 'ish with her' [but note that the phrase now sounds almost identical in Hebrew to the phrase "to her woman with her"—the wordplay and ambiguity around 'ish and 'issab continues.]. And he eats.

Now we revert to the last verse of Genesis 2. "And the eyes of the pair were opened, and they knew that they were 'arumim, and they sowed together fig-leaves and made for themselves girdles." It's easy to read that 'arum now means simply nakedness, but in alluding back to the end of the previous chapter and the beginning of this episode, we are asked to read more richly. They knew they were naked (and needed clothes)? They knew they were innocent (and in over their heads)? They knew they were naïve (and had been taken in)? They realized they were subtle and shrewd (and were indeed like God/gods)? In fact the term *hagorot* usually refers to something more like a work-belt or a simple cincture than a loincloth for covering the genitals.

Has there been a fall? I press this reading out of the ambiguities because it clarifies how deeply invested we are in certain habitual modes of reading that do not necessarily have a clear basis in the text. At this point there is still no real evidence that they know "good and evil"—they simply know themselves differently. So is the "fall" simply a descent into self-awareness from blithe stumbling about in oblivion? There is also no real clarity about which tree

32. The artistic tradition represents this ambiguity—sometimes there are clearly two trees, sometimes there is only one tree. This is place where the text, read carefully, very clearly deconstructs all attempts to create unitizing interpretations. Because classical readings must exonerate God, the ambiguities are always ignored or clouded over.

33. Another common element in artists' representations of this scene is the portrayal of the woman with eyes wide open and the man with eyes shut or barely open. The woman is also often represented as filled with movement and vitality, and the man almost as an immobile or wooden block.

they ate from—the proscribed tree of knowing good and evil or the tree of life in the middle of the garden. Or is the “fall” in fact in the next episode, in the humans’ behaviour in the encounter with God?

Or one can read asking counter-factual questions? Why does God/the text set up the confusion about the trees in the first place? Where is God while all this is going on—why the Divine absence? Where is the *'ish* during the conversation and why does the *'ish* not intervene? What if the *'issab* had simply asked God for a clarification? What if the *'issab* had told the snake to mind its own business? What if the *'issab* had not shared the fruit with the partner? What if the *'ish* had not accepted and eaten the fruit of the tree? What if the *'issab* had not eaten the fruit for herself first, but had shared first with the partner? If the story cannot be imagined with any other choices and outcomes, then we abandon the reality of choice at work for a model of inevitable, mechanistic fate.

I press these readings for another reason. There is no question that the tradition overwhelmingly sees this as a story of disaster, but frequently presents the disaster in a very simplistic way—often reducing it to a matter of obvious obedience, disobedience and punishment. I think pressing on the ambiguities helps us clarify the multiple rich layers of meaning. The “fall” even in its narration represents the totality of the rupture. Language, clarity, categories, intimacy, dialogue, intention—the text represents over and over again how they have become somehow internally divided within their once [never?] whole selves. The notion of the “fall,” the validity of the reading, is still present even if obedience and disobedience are not part of our assumptive world. Only by contemplating how indistinctly we can identify or represent the cause and effect, occasion and implication, reality and illusion within the narrative can we begin to contemplate the totality of our own fallenness. We can’t even get right the story about how it all went wrong. Nor, because we cannot pinpoint the instant of error, the sheer moment of rupture, can we figure out what might have been done to make it right.³⁴

The Lie of Human Religion as Constitutive to the Fall

Wound up, the narrative now unwinds. Hearing the Lord God promenading in the garden in the breezy part of the day the humans hide themselves from the divine face/presence. Thus the first use in the scriptures of the metaphor of the Divine face already reflects a state of rupture. Is this the moment of the fall—the choice to be not present to God’s face? Or is it a moment earlier, when they hear the *qol*, the sound or also the “voice” of God? Is this the moment of turning away and fracture? And the Lord God calls out to the *'adam* and says, “Where are you?” And the *'adam* responds, “Your voice/your sound—I heard it in the garden, and I was afraid—how naked I am—and I hid myself.” The text makes resonate with irony the sapiential maxim: *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*. Is this the moment of the fall—when the relationship between God and creation ceases to be one of love and trust and becomes one of fear? In this we see the beginning of human religion—the lie that to fear God is to be in right relation.

“Who revealed to you how naked you are? Is it from the tree I commanded you not to eat from that you ate?” The use of the verb *ngd* (here in the form meaning “to reveal”) resonates backward and forward. It draws us back by allusion to the purpose of the partner—to be the *'ezer kenegdo*, to one who will confront and disagree and hold one accountable to the truth by always being present. And it takes us forward to the language of the prophetic and liturgical tradition where what is set forth and revealed (*higgid*) are the mysterious intentions and the glorious

34. And how much of the complexity and ambiguity of Genesis 3 is captured in Philippians 2:1-15—basically a counterfactual version of our story.

actions of God. In this single allusion we see the internal rupture of the purpose of the *'ezer kenegdo*, the great work of grace for the aloneness of the human, the rupture of human partnership, and its parallel in the rupture within human religion itself, where the language and mechanisms of revelation intended for the most intimate sharing of God's purposes and works are debased to the language and mechanisms of shame and guilt and manipulation. Religion can do nothing but reveal human nakedness, in the fall, religion's power to speak of God and humanity has been stripped clean. All human religion is a naked void.³⁵

The Collapse of Human Mutual Responsibility as Constitutive to the Fall

What then unfolds is the sequence of non-acceptance of responsibility and blame in which again every statement is ambiguous with relation to the truth: "The *'issah* you gave me for togetherness/partnership—she gave me from the tree and I ate." (Accusation and abandonment of self-differentiation—the purpose of the *'ezer kenegdo* was to help through mutual confronting and challenging, not through abandonment to de-selfing.) "The snake deceived/enticed me and I ate." (Accusation and self-deception—did the snake ever speak what was not true? Who saw the fruit of the tree?) Is this the real moment of the "fall?"

The Lord God now speaks in turn to the snake, the *'issah* and the *'adam*. In turn we see delineated the consequences of the rupture within creation: the natural order of creatures set against itself; humans set against the order of creatures; human awareness of pain and suffering in procreation and in daily labour; humans set against their own progeny; the breakdown of the partnership with the *'ezer kenegdo* into one in which partners are co-dependent victims of their own drives and longing; mutuality replaced by male power and domination (humans were to rule over the creation not over one another); human alienation from their own labour; human alienation from the stuff of their bodies (the *'adamah*, the soil, is cursed—not simply a change in the economic relationship to the soil but in the relationship to the foundational element of which the human self is made); human alienation from eternity as *telos* into time as cyclic dissolution into death and dust.

The Failure to Confess the Word of God as Constitutive to the Fall

We can point to two or three other crucial issues in these divine judgements. In speaking to the *'adam* God says: "Because you listened to the voice of your *'issah* and you ate from the tree about which I commanded you..." While many traditional reading might see this as pointing somehow to the inferiority of the woman (e.g. the old saw that women should not teach etc.), these divine words draw us back into one of the ambiguities of the narrative itself. In the narrative, only the *'adam* was given the command. One of the real questions of the narrative is whether the *'issah* actually knew the divine command. This opens a new dimension, again relating to religion. The consequences for all humanity (represented in the text's continuation of the term *'adam* rather than the term *'ish*) rise out of the *'adam's* failure to share and communicate the Word of God faithfully to the partner.

35. So a crucial metaphor for the restoration of right relationship between God and humanity is not the establishment of a new religion, but the affirmation of the restoration of the possibility of human partnership that participates in genuine intimacy and in the reality of the "marriage"/partnership between Christ and Israel and Christ and the Church.

The Error of Natural Law and Natural Religion as Constitutive to the Fall

The woman is correct in asserting that she was beguiled and deceived—because in this context the snake stands not for “snake religion” but for all natural religion in which the natural order is taken “to speak” accurately for and about God, in which the natural order is taken to reflect the divine command and therefore to be an adequate foundation for human religion, social ordering, economic ordering and moral ordering.³⁶ I understand this to be the foundational critique not only of natural religion, but of all forms of natural law—this is why the snake’s speech is **both true and deceiving**. Where religion finds itself on conceptions of natural law it can only speak like the snake, and such religion can only lead to the relationships articulated in the Divine judgement on the snake—relationships of exclusion and marginalization (“cursed more than all other beasts”); relationships of humiliation and economic deprivation (“on your belly you shall go and dust you shall eat all your life”); relations of resentment, conflict, and oppression (“enmity between you and the woman, your seed and her seed, it shall bruise your head, you shall bruise its heel”). This world of exclusion, marginalization, humiliation, economic deprivation, resentment, conflict and oppression is the best and only thing natural law and natural religion have to offer human beings and nature.

We should note here what others have noted, that the words of divine judgement need to be read in their full ambiguity as both descriptive and prescriptive. These words describe for us the world as we know and experience it—but this world is the world after the fall in which we live. They point us to a fundamental reality of divine judgement throughout the scriptures: God’s judgement and “curse” is simply the reality of humans living with the consequences of their actions and choices. To take these words, as some do, prescriptively of God’s will for creation is to deny the reality of the fall. God’s will for creation was spoken in the Words of grace, fecundity, limit and consolation in Genesis 1 and 2. In and after the fall we see power, procreation and consumption (the gifts of the first blessing in Genesis 1) increasingly entangled into the web of oppressive structures manifested in marriage, family, society, and the political order—the words of judgement are prescriptive in the sense that they direct us to this inevitably increasing entanglement even in the very institutions we think are delivering us from our abjection and confusion. I understand the scriptures to be a complex and multi-valent critique of this fallen state through which God’s judgement and grace are at work (but not always transparently or obviously). I understand the New Testament to offer through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ “God’s presence, and very self and essence all-divine” in three cures: the Self-Emptying (*kenosis*) and Cross, the community of Baptized followers of Jesus, and the Eucharist. (See chart on following page.) But this Word and Presence was also and already there in the garden. If being “a new creation in Christ” means in some way that we are released to be free for God as God intended us in creating all things, then that means being free to be in relationship as intended in the pre-fallen world.

So humankind depart from the garden, and death becomes, in Wesley’s phrase, the “seal” on God’s endless mercies, since were we able to reach out and eat from the Tree of Life without knowing the way of the Cross, the community of the risen Lord, and the Table of Thanksgiving, we would know eternal life, but only as “heirs to endless woe.”

36. This is ultimately one of the reasons why the Wisdom literature is not placed in the Torah or Prophets, but in the Writings—but it functions there as a valid critique/balance lest we misconstrue the intense focus on revelation elsewhere in the canon. Creation/the natural order is also a work of God and therefore, reflected on rightly in its place, offers us wisdom, insight, understanding into the will and purpose of God—and that form of Divine revelation is available throughout the created order to all humans (Psalm 19). The mistake is always to turn that understanding of the natural order into a foundation for religion.

| Genesis 1 | Genesis 2 | Genesis 3–4 (AFTER THE FALL) | The New TESTAMENT |
|---|--|---|---|
| | | <p>The desires now become punishments, but this is not the way God intended the world to be—<i>Phyllis Trible notes curses are descriptive of reality as experienced not prescriptive of reality as it should be.</i></p> | |
| <p>Desire/need for power Dominate the earth</p> | <p>Desire/need for power Till the earth and serve it— collaboration with creation</p> | <p>Desire/need for power Enmity between creatures and humans, and enmity between humans and the soil “it shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel...” Patriarchy and family dysfunction rather than equality in relationship</p> | <p>Desire/need for power The Incarnation as the model for all human relationships, and the Cross and the work of human reconciliation</p> |
| <p>Desire/need for perpetuity/eternity Be fruitful and multiply</p> | <p>Desire/need for perpetuity/eternity It is not good for the ‘<i>adam</i>’ to be alone—the search for the ‘<i>ezer kenegdo</i>’—the one who can be equal in relationship Leading to social institution of “marriage”</p> | <p>Desire/need for perpetuity/eternity Pain and suffering in childbearing Family, clan and nation as primary social goods—the stranger as enemy Fratricide</p> | <p>Desire/need for perpetuity/eternity Replacement of marriage, family, clan and nation with the inclusive community of Baptism (disciples of Jesus drawn from all nations and peoples)</p> |
| <p>Desire/need for survival—to consume To you I have given all green things for food</p> | <p>Desire/need for survival—to consume Of the tree in the middle of the garden you may not eat—limit</p> | <p>Desire/need for survival—to consume Struggle to make the earth yield food—thorns and thistles economy as competition for scarce goods</p> | <p>Desire/need for survival—to consume The Eucharist as the model of distributive economy in which all receive what they need that is also paradoxically the same as what everyone else receives.</p> |

4. Foundations of the Biblical Critique of Patriarchy

Genesis 3 and the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 open what I understand to be a deep and subtle underlying critique of patriarchy that runs throughout the scriptures. I understand it to be a critique because it appears embedded in the texts at major nodal moments (the “fall,” the first murder, the patriarchal/matriarchal cycles, the Exodus, the David cycle, the Elijah–Elisha cycle, certain prophetic books) where other key critical themes are also present. This internal biblical critique is essential in understanding anything else we may perceive to be said or indicated in the texts about questions such as marriage and sexuality, holding superficial conclusions constantly under questioning and judgement. This critique is foundational—beginning as it does in Genesis 3 and 4 it points to patriarchy as one of the most profound and problematic forms of disordered and fallen creation.

It has become a commonplace to say that the biblical text is “patriarchal.” This can mean at least two different things. For some, it means that the Bible presents patriarchy as the correct and divinely ordained ordering and norm of creation. What usually flows from this are forms of reading of the text that see institutions and structures of patriarchy as they are described or manifested in the texts as prescriptive of normative ordering in all human societies. For others, to say the biblical text is “patriarchal” is to say that it originates within a literary and social matrix in which patriarchy is the norm, and it reflects those assumptions in its portrayal of human and other relations. What usually flows from this is either an argument that the text is thus “committed” as part of a web of such oppressive texts to press, through its assumed religious authority, the acceptance of patriarchy as normative (*cui bono?* and thus untrustworthy), or that the text is thus “flawed” through its human error in acceptance of patriarchy (developmentally naïve, and thus untrustworthy).

I understand the biblical texts to be “patriarchal” in the following sense only. The texts as a body are “patriarchal” in that they emerge from and portray patriarchal patterns and relationships in the same way that they portray political relationships of kingship, empire, and colonialization, or economic relationships of peasant villages, nomadic herders, slavery, urban–rural imbalance, military defence expansion, centralizing luxury economies, or mid–first century Corinth. To write a text out of the assumptions and realities of a particular context does not make it instantly a naïve projection of that context as normative, as morally desirable, or as divinely ordained.³⁷

The biblical texts portray patriarchy as a web or network of familial, social, religious, economic, and political behaviours, assumptions, institutions, and normalizations, that install and sustain male power, authority, and desire at all levels of human relationship and functioning.³⁸ This network of interlocking and dynamic forces is understood to be a part of human reality and experience. At key nodal points within the text aspects of this network are exposed for reflection, portrayed as disrupted, and deconstructed both symbolically and in the narratives’ account of reality, often through specific instances of divine or divinely ordained activity.

37. Consider the complex critique Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* offers of Napoleonic-war period slave economy in England. Or, to stay with Austen, the complex way in which all her novels offer a critique of the institution of marriage as it was socially constructed in the classes with which she is concerned—not simply in its impact on women, but also in its perverse impact on men.

38. Feminist theory may understand and describe patriarchy differently. This is simply an attempt to describe what are the strands and dynamics that the biblical texts lay open to our attention.

Patriarchy as Constitutive of the Fallen World

The first and most significant of these moments, outlined above, is in the rupture of the fall, when the mutuality of relationship implied in all aspects of the narrative of Genesis 2, becomes, after the fall, disordered relationships of desire and power. These portrayed disorders include: male domination of the woman in the intimate relationship; female as subservient not only to the male but to her own desire and passions for the male; separation of men and women into gendered social functions; and social and religious structures (as outlined above) in which by implication (3:17) women's speech and intellectual activity will be treated as inferior and flawed.

The Conflict of Brothers and Patriarchy

The second focal moment of this critique is in the important Cain and Abel narrative in Genesis 4:1-16. This text is critically nodal because it also presents the first moment in another prolonged biblical critique, the critique of power and violence. It is a narrative about murder by which murder is denoted as a foundational aspect of the fallen world. In this text murder and violence cannot be understood apart from an analysis of socio-economic structures, differences, and tensions (one is a herder, the other is an agriculturalist). Murder and violence are intimately linked to religion (the murder rises out of a religious event in which two forms of sacrifice are set in competition). Murder and violence are intimately linked to movements within the human psyche ("why is your face fallen?") and human perceptions of acceptance or exclusion ("if you do well, you will be accepted"). Murder and violence are linked to the disordering and proper ordering of human choice ("sin is crouching at the door 'desiring' you, yet you can master it" — parallel precisely in language to the disordering of male-female intimacy in Genesis 3:16). Murder and violence release an unending cycle of responsive violence, either in the structures of individual revenge or at the level of societal revenge ("see, whoever finds me will kill me," and the poem of Lamech).

But the text is also about an older brother who kills a younger brother. Superficially, then the text points us to sibling rivalry (murder and violence cannot be understood from the dynamics of family formation and interactions). But in this the text links us to a central pattern in the Genesis narratives—the narratives in which the older brother is set aside for the younger brother. In the narrative of Cain and Abel the older brother forcibly sets aside the younger brother. Throughout the rest of Genesis, God sets aside older brothers in favour of the younger. This setting aside functions constantly to symbolize the Divine rejection and reordering of a much larger set of social and familial structures—the domination of the younger male by the older is the normal power orientation of the patriarchal family. The domination represents the normative economic patterning within the patriarchal familial and social structure, and at the broadest level the domination of older males over younger represents the normative ordering of the entire communal and social structure of patriarchy. The Cain and Abel narrative thus points us the inextricable link between male power in patriarchy and the violence required at all times to sustain it. Wherever there is patriarchy there will be murder. Cain's name is associated by wordplay with his power to "create" progeny—the preoccupations of patriarchy are power over progeny, and power over weaker men and over women (e.g. the poem of Cain's geometrically murderous son Lamech: "Ada and Zillah, listen to me..."). But Abel's name, "Breath," points correspondingly to the assumption within patriarchy that the weak are open to the disposition of the strong.

The Fathers and Mothers and the Endless Web of Patriarchy

It is within the Genesis cycle of patriarchal/ matriarchal narratives that we see at every crucial node the setting aside of older for younger males (Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Reuben for Joseph and Judah). The pattern persists elsewhere (Aaron and Moses, the older brothers for David, Absalom and the other siblings for Solomon). The

reading of this pattern within the Christian tradition as a simple trope for the temporal succession of Israel and the Church has perpetuated a superficial interpretation of what is at stake in these narratives. The Jacob/Esau episodes in particular clearly articulate the issues of birthright as economic power, paternal favour for the older brother as a right, and paternal blessing as both economic and spiritual power. In the setting aside of Reuben the issue is the assumed right of the firstborn to dominate and sexually possess the women of the weakening older father. But the critique extends to Simeon and Levi who adopt violence to revenge the rape of their sister Dinah, whom they see as a commodity of the family to be protected. This text in Genesis 34 is set in specific structural relationship to Genesis 17 within the whole book as the two chapters extensively preoccupied with circumcision. Genesis 34 also represents, in the debasing of the sign of circumcision, the manner in which patriarchy warps and defiles even the most intimate marks of grace. The association with Levi (pointing to all the subsequent issues in Exodus through Numbers involving the Levites, Moses, Aaron and violence) points to the patriarchal co-opting of even the most sacred forms of religious ritual and expression to sustain its rhetoric and power (evoked in Genesis 34 and again in Jacob's prophetic vision in Genesis 49). In the closing chapters of Genesis, Joseph, the younger brother who has supplanted his older siblings both within the family and within his domination of the hierarchical power structures of Egypt, exercises deliberate psychological violence (in repeated episodes) both to reinforce his power over his brothers, and as a mode of revenge.

The text understands these settings aside of older for younger to be God's choice and action. But this action in several of the texts is mediated through the figures of the prophetic women, especially Sarah and Rebecca. At the crucial junctures, both Sarah and Rebecca articulate the divine insight regarding the re-ordering of power among the siblings. But the Sarah and Rebecca texts also open up aspect of the dynamics by which women become co-opted in patriarchal societies—both in the reiterated wife-sister stories, in the dynamics of the Hagar episodes, and in the great deception exercised upon Isaac. Lest we imagine these text somehow point only at the women, it's important to note that it is the motivations and assumptions of the men that the narratives lay open in the dialogue (about competition with other men for women, the conventions of, and confusions of, partnership and property, of fear that other men will sexually seize the women one views as property, etc). In dealing with their sons, Abraham and Isaac (the latter both symbolically and really) have their vision of the divine will occluded and blinded.

This pattern is inverted in the Jacob-Laban cycle of narratives, in which the notion that patriarchy can be changed by social or economic negotiation opens up to scrutiny. Jacob negotiates and works seven years for Rachel whom he loves. At the marriage he discovers the father-in-law has substituted Leah, the older sister whom he does not love. "This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn," responds Laban to Jacob's outrage. At a certain level, the entire narrative of Jacob's family represents the interwoven dysfunctions of patriarchal familial and social ordering, including the dynamics of economic possession, the dispossession of older men, competition among spouses and siblings, the symbolic and real devotion to fertility in all its forms, the linkage between the maintenance of the taboo/fear of women's menstrual blood and idolatry. Symbolically, the tension between Jacob and Laban in this gigantic patriarchal battle represents and is represented by their origin and final location. Laban remains an Aramean; Jacob dissociates himself ultimately from the way of his forefathers (Laban is his mother's sibling) and returns to Canaan, the land of the promise and the covenant. Jacob does not cease to be a patriarch—but he is changed by his wrestling with humans and with God. The text marks this by two episodes of name change. The second of these is linked textually to the burial of the household and fertility gods stolen from her father and brought by Rachel at the time of the departure from Syria.

I understand these settings aside of older for younger by God to be a primary articulation of the divine rejection and judgement on patriarchy. The texts open up its dynamics for our understanding, but they also repeatedly enact the rejection of patriarchy in both real and symbolic fashion. But in the same way the prophet Nahum articulates the divine overthrow of all empires of force, yet empires continue to be, these repeated momentary rejections of

patriarchy do not replace patriarchy—like the fall of Nineveh, the displacement of Esau by Jacob is also a figure of the hope and restoration of all humanity yet to come.³⁹

Exodus, Redemption, and Patriarchy

I understand the confrontation between God and Pharaoh/God and Egypt in the Exodus to be the single point that exposes to our scrutiny the entire depravity of the mechanisms of power and hierarchy which are the embodiment both of the human revolt against God and of the cosmic revolt of the powers against God. I understand Luke's unique use of the term *exodos* in his version of the Transfiguration as pointing us back to the Exodus to understand that what happens in Jerusalem to Jesus (the Cross and the resurrection) is the other single point at which the entirety of the mechanism is exposed to our scrutiny.

Exodus 11 through 13 tightly draws together a series of disparate strands which point in both real and symbolic ways to the meaning of the Exodus, the cost of human freedom, and the powers which are overthrown.

First we have the theme of the borrowing of gold and silver to which I have alluded earlier, and understand as the representation of an understanding of the economic foundations of human society, both in their real form and in their twisted form as idolatry. Then we have the announcement of the final plague in which all the firstborn of Egypt will be killed, human and animal. This omnipresence of death crossing all living orders of creation points us back to Genesis 3 and 4 and the fundamental mechanisms of violence by which power and hierarchy are mediated and maintained in the fallen order. This will be laid open for all to see, and the distinction between Egypt and Israel will be precisely that the community of God will be a place of life, not death. Then we have the announcement of the disjunction of time—this will be the beginning of months. In this new creation time is marked by the rituals of freedom (Passover), not by the cycles of nature (the middle-eastern new year) or by the cycles of the economy (the third, or economic, new year common to societies centred on commerce).

There follow the directions for the Passover lamb, and the marking of lintels with blood, linked here with a reiteration of the proclamation of death of the firstborn, but now also linked to the execution of judgement on all the gods of Egypt. The action of the shared meal on earth marks the releasing of an action which is cosmic in scope—an event marked by creation of egalitarian economic community, nurturing and preparation for action, and safety and divine protection. This action is prospective; it looks forward. Then follow the commands regarding the festival of unleavened bread, the purpose of which is retrospective, that is, to look backward in recollection. The ritual life of this community takes its shape from the memory and marking of God's action in deliverance from Egypt. The directives about the Passover lamb and the blood are reiterated, this time both in prospective form and specifically as a retrospective commemoration of deliverance from death for the future. The people do this, and the plague of death unfolds.

39. We might also note the repeated episode of the Zelophehad sisters, first in Numbers 27 and 36, and reiterated in Joshua 17. In this episode the principle of inviolability the divine gift of the land to the families and clans is shown to override the patriarchal principle of male inheritance. In the first two episodes the setting aside of the patriarchal principle is modeled in two elaborate social negotiations which look forward to the community's future life in the land of Canaan. In the repetition of the material in Joshua it is seen as a significant episode of interpretation embodying the principle to be repeated from the perspective of the actual moment of dividing the land. The upending of patriarchy is not merely some imaginary value of the community expressed in nice legal principles, but must be embodied in real social arrangements involving control of land and economy.

The people leave Egypt, with the silver and gold jewelry, and with their unbaked bread. Then follow more regulations regarding the eating of the passover lamb—this time in relation to who may eat it. It is a meal for those who are free and who wish to join and take on the marks of the community of freedom. Then comes the crucial injunction—hitherto all the firstborn of humans and animals must be consecrated to God. Now the festival of unleavened bread is redescribed from the perspective not simply of memorial action for deliverance, but as a re-articulation of the events of the Exodus and the action of God for human freedom and community in the **promised land**, identified by its association with the peoples who possess it. The ritual action is not simply a memory of God’s action on behalf of the community, but the proclamation of the values of the community and the promise of God’s action wherever the people will go. Then follows a further more detailed rearticulation of the requirement to sacrifice the first-born, again from the perspective of the land of Canaan, where this too becomes a perpetual witness to the cost of freedom.

I have laid out this sequence (Exodus 11-13) at length because the constant recombination of ritual regulation and narrative in several different variants press us for reflection. The authors/redactors could have presented this material in a much more simple fashion if it were simply a matter of laying out several different rituals and their meanings. It is again precisely in the combination of narrative and the folding in of ritual direction and interpretation that the meanings lie.

The Cost of Freedom in Exodus and the Scandal of Patriarchy

The pivotal theme of the Exodus is the deliverance of the Hebrew people from bondage into freedom.⁴⁰ That freedom, however, has a tremendous cost. In the narrative as it is presented, the forces that enslave the people (as represented by the hardened heart of Pharaoh and his state apparatus) can only be overthrown by a divine act of death-dealing. We may find this “distasteful,” and generations of Jewish and Christian interpreters have explored the dilemmas this poses for our understanding of God, but it remains the basic assertion of the text about how God acts to free the enslaved. The cost of life and freedom for the Israelites is death for someone else. I believe the text asserts that there is no escape from this cost; it is a paradigmatic reality of life.⁴¹

The Israelites go free from bondage in Egypt: the cost of this freedom is the death of the firstborn of human and beast throughout Egypt. This has implications at several levels. First of all, as we have traced above, primogeniture, the right of the firstborn to power in clan and society is a foundational aspect of social order in many societies. It is connected to hierarchy as a mechanism for decision-making within the larger social order. Thus by implication, the cost of freedom is the death of the right of primogeniture. In these texts we see God actively overthrowing the basic principle by which social order is structured and maintained. Now this total overthrow of the basis of the power to enslave (fundamental to hierarchies of all sorts—somebody’s got to be on the bottom for everyone else above to bleed dry) is enacted most vividly on Egypt. But the text goes further by inscribing, as a fundamental aspect of Israelite life and culture, the sacrifice of every firstborn human or animal as a permanent memorial of the price of freedom.

40. Portions of the next section were first given as a Lenten parish education session at St Cuthbert’s, Leaside, in the late 1990’s and then published in the Toronto *Catholic Worker*.

41. There is a famous midrash, or interpretive story, from the rabbis in the Jewish tradition, which tells how when the Israelites had crossed the sea and were safe on the other side, and Pharaoh’s charioteers were struggling and drowning in the torrents of mud and water, the angels in heaven begin to sing and applaud and rejoice and dance. God silences them and asks why they are celebrating like this. “Because your people are free and the Egyptians who oppressed them are dying” comes the response. And God says, “How can you sing and rejoice when any of my creatures are dying?”

So every firstborn son must be redeemed. The very right of the firstborn to exist is permitted only as an act of grace, at a cost to the family of a valuable economic asset—an animal in impeccable physical shape and vigour.

Thus, in the divinely commanded order of the Exodus, to be firstborn is not a position of privilege and power, but a permanent position of obligation to those born later, to the weaker members of the family, clan or community. While in most societies and religions the right of the firstborn (and their socio-economic equivalents) to power and wealth is normative, in God's chosen community and all communities (such as the Church) that follow from it, this right is merely permissive.

The implications of this extend further. The text indicates that it is sons who must be redeemed, not daughters. A simplistic historicist reading might say this is because this society considered females inferior to males. The text is, I suggest, significantly more radical than that. For this text, the price of freedom is not only the overthrow of primogeniture, but also the overthrow of the assumption of natural privilege of the male (which, in most societies over the past three millennia or more has been another of the normative foundations of social order). The text calls into question any society which assumes as normative the superiority of males. The very right of the male to power is at best for these Exodus texts a permissive right, purchased at a cost to the family and community. Thus males may not lord it over the family or the community, since their very existence has been purchased by the family and the community from their birth. It is in allusion to this aspect of the Exodus that Paul says when writing to the Corinthians about family life and social order, "You were bought with a price; do not become slaves to human masters."

This sacrifice of the firstborn recurs in legal form, in ritual form, and in social form across the Torah. In Numbers, the Levites become corporately the "redemption" of all the firstborn in Israel for all time. But Numbers also makes clear that Levites also lose the right to share in a portion of the land with the other tribes. Thus, the various threads of the ritual requirements of the firstborn, in the very acts and forms of remembering, inscribe in Israel's foundation as a community at the Exodus, this encoded overturning and rejection of patriarchy and hierarchy in all its forms. The rituals of redemption are interlocked with **all** the forms of power and social ordering—economic, ritual, social, political and religious class structures and power systems, gender distinctions, and familial power systems.

The Crucified and Risen One as Firstborn of All Creation—Jesus Christ's Death and Resurrection as God's Judgement on Patriarchy

More significantly, the language of the requirement to sacrifice the firstborn, even the use of the term, appears in a wide range of New Testament texts as one of the dominant ways of describing Jesus Christ, and his death on the cross. This work of "redemption" is not some superficial "purchasing back" of humanity from the Devil, as it is often portrayed. The "redemption" to which these texts refer is precisely the accomplishment by the "Firstborn of all creation" of the sacrifice required as the price for the Exodus of all creation from bondage. This bondage is not merely some notional spiritual state of slavery to sin, but is also the physical state of bondage to which the exercise of power and violence, empire and domination, the family order and patriarchy, continue to subject humanity, endlessly perpetuating its misery.

The work of the Cross is not an imaginary death; the powers that oppress humanity are not "ideas." The human body of Jesus did not undergo some imaginary form of suffering, any more than the billions of women, children and other men who have suffered rape, violation, torture, dismemberment, and death under the domination of the patriarchal and hierarchical order maintained by human states and religions (including Christian faith when it becomes a religion) have suffered imaginary suffering.

So too, the risen body of Jesus Christ, the "firstborn from the dead" is not an "imaginary body"—it is a real Body and presence, and like the Exodus, it marks a real (not merely a theoretical) change in the material conditions

of the whole of humanity. The “redeemed community” which shares in the risen body rejects every means of force, power, authority and domination; the “redeemed community” in all its rituals and with all its memory exposes the lies of patriarchy and hierarchy and their espousal of the normalizing death-dealing mechanisms of social life that inscribe their power and demands. And the primary place where the “redeemed community” does this is at the Eucharistic table. At once this Table is both prolepsis and analepsis, the revelation of the true divine economy of justice and equity, of the true community of all humanity as one Body, the Passover feast of the Lamb and the feast of Unleavened Bread. At this Table we eat the shared meal which once again releases God’s action of deliverance in and through Christ’s Body wherever men and women are enslaved in Egypt, and we consume the shared meal of memory that gives glory for the overthrow of the gods of Egypt in the new creation, that gives glory for the deliverance and redemption for humanity, that gives glory for the wind of the Spirit that blows back the waters that seek to overwhelm us as the armies of Pharaoh and Egypt seek to pursue us still, that gives glory for the fire that burns on Sinai and continues to burn in our hearts.

5. The Biblical Critique of Patriarchy in the Struggle with the Ba^cals, in the Wisdom literature, and in Ephesians

The Genesis episodes of displacement of elder sons, and the texts relating to the Exodus, lay out, in my view, this fundamental biblical critique of patriarchy. Again, I would note, this does not mean that suddenly there are no more biblical narratives in which there is patriarchy, or that there are no laws that seem to be patriarchal in function. The Torah is even more emphatic in its rejection of slavery, yet there are laws permitting and regulating forms of slavery. By the same token, I understand this critique of patriarchy to be a genuine foundational critique—linked to the biblical understanding and critique of all the other forces that warp and destroy humanity.

Already in the Old Testament, this same “already and not yet” exists that is present in the gospel accounts of the kingdom, and more generally in the New Testament’s presentation of the work of Jesus Christ and the nature of the Church. In this regard, the texts seek constantly to help us distinguish our own temptation to imagine the forms of the “not yet” as the ultimate reality of which we have seen only the glimpse of the “already.” In the scriptures the primary and constant ally of all the most depraved forms of the powers that dominate and twist the existence of human beings is religion. The texts are full of polemical and other discourse about forms of human religions. But the biblical texts go much further than this—they constantly open up for our scrutiny the ways in which Israel’s own worship of God abandons its first love and becomes twisted into yet another form of religion. We see this laid out in diverse forms in Judges, Samuel, and Kings.

Our tendency is simply to consider this as a merely theoretical or ideational change—they abandoned the worship of the One God and turned to idol worship (to use a classic biblical summary of a much more complex process). But as I noted earlier, the scriptures are very clear that idols are nothing but material objects and have no power whatsoever.⁴² If worshipping idols were all that were at issue, the texts would not convey the genuine level

42. See Psalm 115 and extended passages in Isaiah 40-55 for classic theological statements of this. But in narrative form the Ark in Gaza narrative of 1 Samuel represents a much earlier form of the same transparent debunking of idols as such. It is not an accident that the humour in the story centres around haemorrhoids.

of passion and hysteria they do.⁴³ I understand the biblical discourse to lay out for our contemplation not only the historical and social processes by which we constantly fall into “religion” and the forms of “false worship” that constitute the heart of all religion, but also to lay out certain dominant themes that infuse all forms of religion across time so that we recognize them and can avoid their seductions and entanglements. Across Israel’s history the greatest temptation was the confusion of its own God with what are referred to as *Baal* and the ‘*baals*’ (even this divergent terminology signals fundamental aspects of the reality to which it refers). Nor is this simply a geographical matter of proximity—the major centres of *Baal* worship were certainly in northern Israel and Phoenicia, but Israel was equally in proximity to other forms of religion with which it seems to have become much less entangled.

The language of the “idol” functions to point us to the need to understand the “power” the idol represents. This “power” is the named “god” whose image the idol purports to represent. The image may in itself communicate aspects of the power associated with the “god.” Each “god” and its “name” represents a differentiated cluster of themes, values, and powers—there are so many of them in human history, not because they are all the same, but precisely because each one represents a different concatenation of forces, nuclear values, or influences. Because a “god” represents a collection of themes, values, nodal ideas, and forces, the “religion” of the god takes its own unique form. But more than this is true—humans worship gods because the particular concatenation of values and forces around the god fulfils a specific sets of needs for social or economic or political or familial security, flourishing, or order. So a god and its religion also stands for, and guarantees and sustains, a social order which embodies in its totality the entirety of the system of forces, values, ideas, powers, and themes associated with the god. The Bible is very aware of the process as well by which “gods” accrete to themselves wider and wider systems of influence by “absorbing;” as it were, other “gods.”⁴⁴ Because these powers manifest themselves in social and economic orders and interactions

43. This is, of course, the other side of the Deuteronomic dilemma. From a purely historical perspective it is clear that the Deuteronomic ideology is the response to the century of heightened anxiety in Judah following the Assyrian destruction and deportation of Samaria in the 720’s, and leading up to the eventual collapse of Judah in 587 at the hands of the rising Babylonian empire. At the most extreme some would argue based on physical and cultural remains that there was never really a monotheistic Judah before the Deuteronomic movement. Whatever the earlier degree of religious variety in Judah, all the texts, even discounting the level of polemic behind them, would indicate that public policy was at such a high level of anxiety that almost any religious system that promised security and safety was given a place to flourish. So first of all, the Deuteronomic movement is a serious attempt to create and articulate some sort of religious system that would have the force of unifying an anxious public (going about in gangs and smashing up and killing designated enemies has a long history of success in creating public unity), but at the same time articulate a set of socio-economic and religious values that could also unify a broad spectrum of the population. This is a sociological description of what seems to me to be going on. The ambiguity in the Deuteronomic movement lies precisely in the way that it draws together the best elements from the ancient tradition: monotheism; the egalitarian generous legal tradition (scholars have always noted its reframing of laws regarding woman and slaves); the sense of the place of the *can ha’ares* (the folk of the land) as the true inheritors of the land from God; the fundamental necessity of the prophetic tradition and the suspicion of the royal system; and the critique of the hierarchy, the economic oppression, and the patriarchy (Joshua 2) that was at the heart of the Canaanite city states and the gods that maintained those systems. The Deuteronomists rave on about and hate idols not because they have some irrational fear of statues and altars, but because they genuinely saw into the socio-economic evil and depravity that these “gods” were guarantors of. The irony is that the Deuteronomic movement in its turn became the most fallen form of the Israelite religion, and we continue to see the nuclear half-life of its late seventh century BCE explosion present in almost every violent and oppressive element and form of Christianity that has existed.

44. The third word of Genesis 1 is the biblical deconstruction of this entire process of “accretion” among the “gods.” *Elohim*, the biblical name for the One God, literally means “gods.” But the texts also accrete to Israel’s divine name for the One God [YHWH] the imagery and epithets of diverse other gods over a long period of time. The most obvious example is the storm-imagery traditionally associated with *Baal*, the north-west semitic thunder and storm god. But see Mitchell Dahood’s commentary on the Psalms for a thorough working through of this premise based on cross-cultural poetic parallels.

(often in more obvious and permanent ways than in religious rituals), the texts and narratives themselves expose to view the crucial aspects of the system.

Baal and Patriarchy

The key body of texts relating to the crisis of Baalism appears in the accounts particularly of Elijah's confrontation of it in northern Israel.⁴⁵ In 1 Kings 16:29-33, immediately preceding the first appearance of Elijah on the scene, Ahab, king of the northern kingdom of Israel, marries a Phoenician princess, Jezebel. In doing so he accepts the role of patron of her god *Baal*. Superficially, it is easy to see the crisis here as conflict over who is the true god—the God of Israel, or *Baal*, god of the Phoenicians. Indeed, this is the question Elijah poses to the Israelites, but not as a mere question of consumption (do you prefer corn flakes or rice krispies), but because he understands that *Baal* and YHWH are fundamentally two different divinities embodying two totally different sets of communal, economic, religious and social values. Alternatively, the issue is often presented as one of syncretism—the attempt to reconcile and synthesize diverse religious practices and beliefs. I think the complete collection of texts makes clear that in the crisis lies a much more profound confusion.

The very word '*Baal*' could not be uttered without automatically conveying several meanings:

- 1) *Baal* was an alternate name for the thunder and storm god Hadad, associated in the northwest semitic mythological pantheon with the coming of the rains and the renewal of the agricultural cycle. *Baal* was also a dying and rising god, representing the cyclic inevitability of nature. Thus *Baal* religion was bound up in a theology that sacralized the natural and that viewed the natural pattern and order of things as inviolable truth, controlling and determining a corresponding set of right and proper relations and patterns for humans and human society.
- 2) *Baal* also had two other ordinary and interconnected everyday meanings. It was one of the common terms for "husband." It was also a common term for an "owner" or a "proprietor." Thus *baal* as a term for husband also conveys a social ideology of marriage and partnership that implies male control, ownership, and domination. *Baal* is the great biblical god of patriarchy (though there are others).

Elijah's Critique of Baalist Patriarchy

The great achievement of the Omride dynasty that ruled Israel was its having built the immensely successful city Samaria and having brought in a period of economic prosperity. This involved a major change in Israelite society from a subsistence farming mode of life to an urban import-export focus combined with the development of a large military establishment. This change had been achieved through alliance with the seacoast cities of Phoenicia, an alliance that took both a religio-cultural and an economic form. The king's marriage to Jezebel is the symbol of, and actual effecting of, this alliance; she represents the triumph of the new over the old values, not only in religion but in social and economic matters as well. In the episode of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21), Jezebel masterminds the manipulation of the citizens of Samaria to scapegoat Naboth, in order to alienate and seize his legitimate tribal inheritance. The stolen vineyard is symbolic of the overturning of traditional economic order, and also of the effective

45. Another version of some of the material that follows appears in "Prophecy, Leadership, and Communities in Crisis" in *Living Together in the Church: Including our Differences*, ed. Greig Dunn and Chris Ambidge, pp. 178-199 (ABC Publishing, 2004).

subversion of the power of the traditional structures of law and justice. The shift of property and wealth away from traditional familial and clan ownership to an urban elite led to resentment and political upheaval as witnessed by repeated dynastic coups and increased rural poverty (1 Kings 17:10-12, 1 Kings 21).

Elijah criticizes the new socio-economic structures from the perspective of the older, more egalitarian Israelite religion and tradition. He intervenes in the episode of Naboth's vineyard, which classically represents the transfer of socio-economic power. What inflames Elijah more is the conjunction of the socio-economic upward mobility and dominance of the Omride party with the mechanisms and ideologies and practices of *Baal* religion. The new religious system undergirds an unjust economic system with an ideology of power and ownership rooted in the inviolability of the natural order.

Furthermore, its cultic foci divert attention away from what is actually taking place. The ideology of *Baalism* involved, among other things, a powerful emphasis on male-female sexuality and on male potency. (*Baal's* symbolic visual form was a bull.) Whether sexual intercourse (with other humans or with objects) formed part of the cultic ritual is increasingly a matter of debate.⁴⁶ I would argue that whatever view we take of the "practice," the faith crisis in northern Israel is the adoption of a religious ideology founded on male-female sexual congress as essential for upholding the stability of the natural order, with a social ideology of male domination and possession in sexuality and society. In marriage (and, if it existed, in the practices of cultic prostitution), the man was conceived as "owner," the '*ba'al*', of the woman, just as he might own land. The theology diverted attention from the suffering that resulted from the economic displacements and provided justification for powerful men possessing whatever they could get. The cultic practices and symbols reaffirmed the theology.

The Critique of *Baalist* Patriarchy in Hosea

It is for this reason that I understand the book of Hosea (almost a century later than Elijah but also focused on the situation of the northern kingdom, Israel), to be part of this critique of patriarchy in its most seductive form, *Bacalism*. First of all, Hosea makes us aware of the long-lasting power of social and familial ideology when combined with religion, as it almost always is in human culture. Secondly, the fundamental ambiguity in Hosea makes us aware of how pernicious patriarchy is, particularly in its effects on language and the metaphors we choose for God.

Superficially the book seems to be about the metaphor of God marrying/taking back Israel who has been an unfaithful spouse. In the book the Lord commands Hosea to undertake the prophetic sign action of taking a wife who has been partner to many men, marrying her, and remaining faithful to her and having children by her. The children receive names signifying paternal rejection and disfavour (modelling a fundamental preoccupation of patriarchy with control of paternity and authenticity of offspring that functions as a means of social control).⁴⁷ On

46. See most Bible dictionaries for a traditional view that sexual congress with multiple partners was an element of the Baal cult; some of biblical texts are understood to suggest that there were passive male sacred prostitutes as well. One supposition is that this was a form of "sympathetic" activity—humans having sex encouraged the earth to renew its fertility. More recent scholarship argues that cultic prostitution was nonexistent in the ancient Near East (see Jacob Milgrom's on Leviticus 19:29 for a concise review of the recent literature and the questions involved. *Anchor Bible 3A. Leviticus 17-22.*)

47. But see the episode of Saul's rage at Jonathan for his intimate friendship with David for an even more blatant example of this. Saul impugns Jonathan by calling him the "son of a perverse rebellious woman"—but the phrase could be either a projectile language demeaning the son by accusation against the mother, or, given that *ben* also can signify "belonging to the class of," it could be a projectile epithet implying Jonathan's "womanliness" in his relationship with David by accusing him of being "a perverse rebellious woman." All forms of domination and oppression, including patriarchy, have their own unique forms of linguistic abuse and control.

this reading, Hosea's patient suffering of her unfaithfulness and his willingness to take her back after her episodes with other men, even though she has become "tainted goods," is an image of God's suffering and patience with the dalliances of Israel with other gods (for political or other reasons), especially the *ba'als*.

What complicates the book is the language of the divine oracles where God speaks to Israel. These oracles portray the Lord as a God who thinks of a spouse as a possession, who thinks it appropriate to beat and strip and humiliate women, and who makes up for the violence by promising new clothes and rich food and kind treatment. Correspondingly, the oracles portray Israel as speaking like an abused wife who keeps going back to the abuser because he's going to treat her better next time. If we are to read these oracles at this straightforward level, then they would seem to argue that Israel's God is the great guarantor and model for patriarchy—indeed here Israel's God is and behaves like a patriarch. This certainly would represent a dominant stream of conventional readings.⁴⁸

But there is one extended passage which, as I understand it, overturns and dismantles all the other language of the book and shows all of that other language to be infected with the tainted language and ideology of *Baalism* so deeply embedded into all Israel's social, familial and political structures that it has come to dominate and twist the very metaphors by which Israel imagines God. In the middle of chapter 2 there is a sudden shift in tone (but is this just the deceit of the abuser?), and there is a conscious return to all the language and imagery associated with the Exodus, that also takes us back to the crucial issues of Genesis 2 and 3—the language and imagery of human partnership before and after the fall.

Therefore, I will now persuade her,
and bring her into the wilderness,
and speak tenderly to her.

From there I will give her her vineyards,
and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.

There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.

On that day, says the Lord, you will call me, 'My husband,' [*'ishi, the language of Genesis*]
and no longer will you call me, 'My *Baal*.' [*my patriarchal husband / my dominator*].

For I will remove the names of the *ba'als* [*the gods/the patriarchal husbands/the sacred words of the patriarchal system*] from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more.

I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; [*the undoing of the alienation of Genesis 3*]

and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. [*the undoing of the violence that undergirds and characterizes patriarchy and all systems hierarchy and domination.*]

And I will take you for my wife for ever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord. [*the undoing of the norms of relationship after the fall and the return to the mutuality of Genesis 2*]

48. As evidenced in the response, at an academic conference of biblical scholars, by a Canadian Anglican female academic from an evangelical parish in a large multicultural Canadian city, who rose in great distress during a discussion of the abusive language toward women (projected as divine language) in Ezekiel, to explain to the group of scholars that to be critical of such language missed the point that Israel was so wicked and faithless that it had to be punished by God. Because Israel was God's wife and "He" loved her, it was necessary that Israel be beaten as an disobedient wife should be. Sometimes, she said, this was necessary for the wife's own good. Again, I note, this was a professional academic at a public conference of academics in the 1990's from an Anglican background.

On that day I will answer, says the Lord,
 I will answer the heavens
 and they shall answer the earth;
 and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil, [*the return to the original order of creation and the undoing of the infertility of the land after the fall.*]
 and they shall answer Jezreel; [*alludes to the violent murder by Jehu of Jezebel and the offspring of the house of Ahab, In 2 Kings Jehu represents the YHWH-alone party of the north, but his dynastic house continues and depends on the confusion between the surface illusion of faithful YHWH-worship, and the social, political and familial values of the Ba'al cult.*]
 and I will sow him for myself in the land.
 And I will have pity on Lo-ruhamah,
 and I will say to Lo-ammi, 'You are my people';
 and he shall say, 'You are my God.' [*the reversal of the names of Hosea's children, implying both the reversal of patriarchal behaviours and evoking Exodus 19ff. at Sinai, and elsewhere.*]

Clearly, despite this startling juxtaposition, the remainder of the text of Hosea does not indicate some immediate transformation of language or metaphorical conceptions of God. I understand this as pointing critically and prophetically to the difficulty of disentangling patriarchy from the language used about God once our worship of God has fallen into this form of "religion." The judgement on us is the persistent confusion of our language about God (often despite our best efforts), which in turn leads us to growing confusion about what is justice and what is mercy. The three great areas where the scriptures consistently portray our faithfulness as most readily deceived and falling into forms of religion are in relation to economic security and productivity, to power, and to sexuality and models of sexual "normality."⁴⁹ The significance of the struggle with Bacalism is that, more than any other of the idolatries that tempted ancient Israel, Bacalism is the place where, because of the centrality of patriarchy, all three of these forces were most entangled and confused.

Wisdom and Patriarchy

While we can note the misogynist grumblings of Qohelet (but then he tells us not to take at face value anything we are told, so why would we take his grumblings any differently?), the Wisdom text that seems most clearly to portray and normalize patriarchal values is Proverbs. One of the aspects of the form of the proverb collections themselves, with their pairings of subtly differentiated, and sometimes contradictory, proverbs, is to induct us into a mode of reading/knowing that constantly questions and explores anything that purports to be a totalizing statement. The canonical book, however, frames these collections with discourses that set the entirety in a theological framework, and in recent years there has been considerable exploration of the opening framework (chapters 1-9) in particular because of the interest in the broader intercultural connections of the notion of Wisdom or Sophia.

49. Some trenchant observations by One who suffered no such confusions: "Foxes have hole and birds have nests, but the Human One has nowhere to lay his head." "If any want to become my disciples, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me." "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can."

The problem Proverbs poses is that its opening discourse is framed as an address from a father to a son. The first part of the discourse unfolds along a set of developmental anxieties from adolescence to old age, setting against each stage various critical forms of wisdom or resources of wisdom necessary for success. The evolving picture portrays Wisdom primarily as a type of positive or negative “idealized female”—the ideal bride rejected in adolescent foolishness; the adulterous older woman who seeks out virile young men for partnership; the wealthy heiress etc. Increasingly, the typology turns to a projection of “whore” or “goddess” as female hypostatizations of anti-wisdom and wisdom. Again we see a particular aspect of the patriarchal use of language and imaging of women (and children) at work. I would argue, however, that the book (given its predilection for projecting wisdom as “female”) deconstructs this simple patriarchal model.

The framework of Proverbs is not just the opening nine chapters. At its conclusion there are a series of other poems that set up another book-end for the internal royal collections of proverbial sayings. The most important, and last, of these poems is about what it calls the *'eshet-hayil*—literally the “woman-virile,” “the woman-hero,” the “power-woman.” The poem is a description of the ideal partner/ideal wife. But when we reads the poem, while it certainly understands the woman as mother of a family, far more of the poem is given to portraying her as an individual of agency in her own right—economic agency, managing and decision-making agency, agency as a doer of justice and mercy, a partner who enables the other partner to be wise and effective. This “woman-man” is portrayed and acknowledged not as a fantasy projection but as a real person in their own right.

I understand this poem about the “woman-man” once again as taking apart the naïve and patriarchal projections about women and wisdom in the opening frame of the book. These earlier images are simply that—projections or images. The person in the poem at the end is an incarnation of wisdom. One purpose of the poem is to root us in reality, as the wisdom tradition always seeks to do. We [men] recognize fragments or all of the incarnation of Wisdom to be our own mothers, grandmothers, daughters, friends and wives.⁵⁰ But the other purpose of the poem is to take us back to the purpose of the partnership in Genesis 2. This individual is the *'ezer kenegdo* God desires for the human being (the *'adam*, not the male), not the debased form of relationship between woman and man we see in Genesis 3, nor the destructive amalgam of power, economic anxiety and familial control that is the model propounded by “religion” ancient and modern, nor the idealized projection of international patriarchal imagination. And oddly enough, Proverbs gives it an unique and unusual hyphenated name—“the Woman-Man.”

Ephesians and Greco-Roman Patriarchy.

Finally, I want to explore my understanding of Ephesians in relation to this larger question of patriarchy. Ephesians is one of a number of New Testament texts that use or reshape the devices of the Greco-Roman patriarchal order, in particular the socio-literary device sometimes called “house-tables.” Such “house-tables” function culturally to lay out household hierarchies of domination and control emanating from the headship of the entitled male Roman citizen to the lowest slave. The three pillars of Greco-Roman empire were the sanctity and inviolability of the marital household, the extension of power through an elaborate network of patronage and military force that both defined social layers and bridged them in controlled ways, and the slave economy. The house-tables thus represent epitomes of normalizing discourse across the diversity of the empire, and it is not surprising that they appear in so many early Christian letters, as the Church attempts to interpret the socio-economics of the gospel across cultural distances.

50. I note that the “we” who are readers of the text (at least for myself) must be identified as men, and there would be some who would argue that the idealized readers of the text were always “men.” Women may indeed make something very different of this poem, but I would assume that some women might recognize themselves or their own mothers or grandmothers as the *'eshet-hayil* of the text. The proverbs text reminded one friend, who had known Dorothy Day, a founder of the Catholic Worker movement, of Dorothy.

Again it would be important to note that the conventional mode of reading these has been to assume that they project for Christians the correct form of social, familial and relational ordering. On this typical reading they tell us that the Church supports hierarchy and sees patriarchy as the salvific ordering of society.⁵¹ I think this is a mistaken view because it takes these *Haustafeln* out of their context within the letters, treating them as if they were any Greco-Roman set of household rules, reflecting Greco-Roman values, rather than Greco-Roman forms which have been co-opted into a the context of Christian discourse with deliberate counter-cultural irony.

Ephesians is an early Christian letter addressed to people in a city in Asia Minor, to the Christian community in Ephesus, a city which was the fourth largest urban centre after Rome, Alexandria and Antioch, in the first century Roman empire. Ephesus was an ancient centre of civilization; for three centuries it had been home to one of the most beautiful religious buildings anywhere in the Mediterranean world. It sat on a harbour, it oversaw immense trade, and it had recently been reconfirmed with legal rights to tax and control the whole region of Asia Minor, what is now Turkey. With the coming of Augustus' peace and the solidification of the Roman empire in first century of the Christian era, Ephesus was the centre of a population and building boom. Some estimates place the population of Ephesus by the late first century at 400,000-500,000 people, about half the size of Rome, the capital of the empire.

In the fifty years before our letter was written, seven or eight major public facilities including a centre for coordinating all religious activity, a civic centre, several public baths, gymnasia, and a huge theatre had been built. This typical Roman amphitheatre, situated on the main street running up the slope of the mountain from the harbour, seated over 24,000 people. When one sat in the theatre, one looked out under the hot sun to see the blue sky and the harbour and the brilliant turquoise Mediterranean water, and the slaves hauling goods up the harbour street into the city, daily increasing its wealth and influence—one experienced civic pride and shared the resentment that even though Ephesus was a more ancient city than Rome, its wealth and power were being bled away on a daily basis to that distant city across the sea.

This civic building boom was an essential element in the creation of an ideology of civic pride, cohesion and unity. Like all such massive projects, it had engendered civic disputes and divisions. Ephesus was dominated by ruling cliques, entrenched civic and charitable associations, membership in which played a part in determining the flow of wealth and power and influence. Ephesus was an economic driver, but not the centre of the empire's power, so Ephesus was also a place of resentment at fates in the hands of decision-makers in cities half a continent away.

Adjacent to the great amphitheatre, was an extended edifice of newly constructed public latrines and baths. Ephesus was an advanced Greco-Roman city where sanitation and cleanliness of body were important civic values. In this complex were a series of huge public brothels decorated with delicate paintings of the most beautiful prostitutes. Ephesus was a merchant city where you could purchase anything you wanted, and there were the facilities to accommodate every need of the thousands of sailors, business travelers, and bored citizens. Men in Ephesus were raised to understand that the control of their social and economic inferiors—slaves, prostitutes, younger men, and especially their wives was an absolute right which could not be challenged or questioned. It was a deeply patriarchal society; women, children and slaves had an absolute duty to obey the paterfamilias without questioning and to accept their place as inferior, in fact, as possessions.

51. It was a conversation with a group of Cree elders concerned about young women being out of the control of their husbands that led me to rethink the meaning and function of the house-table in Ephesians (and the wider NT house-table tradition) in relation to the socio-religious setting of Ephesus.

The heart of the public city was Curetes Street, named after the ancient religious functionaries who cared for the great Temple of Diana or Artemis. Along this street was a series of new public buildings built by the Romans to assist in making the religious life of Ephesus a unity. In first century Ephesus not only was the traditional Roman cult of Jupiter being established in the name of the Emperor, but in order to unify the city and its place in the empire, the two ancient traditions of Diana and Artemis were also being brought together. The great statue of Artemis at Ephesus had reputedly fallen from heaven, bringing with it order, morality and religion. In the traditional Ephesian version of the Artemis cult, fertility was at its core—with an emphasis on the priority and stability of family values, and notion that the domination of the home and community by men was ordered by the gods. But for nearly two centuries the traditional Artemis cult in Ephesus had been overlaid by the Greek version of the worship of the same goddess—Diana, the goddess of the hunt, the protector of animals, but also the goddess of absolute chastity. By the Roman period this value on chastity expressed itself in combination with patriarchy in a tightening of control over particularly the lives of young women, who were viewed as possessions of their family to be kept pure so that they could be bartered for power and influence among the various social circles of the city in desirable marriages.

Diana/Artemis was also a sky power, the goddess of the moon in two forms—first in its visible form as a goddess of changeability and fate in human lives, and secondly in the moon's invisible form as Hecate, the goddess of darkness and the dark powers which enable human beings to control and manipulate the lives of others. Diana/Artemis was also the goddess of vengeance—the public assertion of the right of one who had been injured or harmed to claim punishment and do equal harm to the one who had injured them. Along Curetes Street stood statues of another important power of the air, the flying Goddess Nike.⁵² Nike personified the values of triumph and victory, the social value that affirmed the right of those with strength to render the weak fodder for their own and society's use.

The wealthy and the civic leaders of Ephesus were also its key religious functionaries, roles they took in turn clan by clan. The key to the ordering of Ephesus' religion was hierarchy, symbolized not only in rigidity of social classes, but in the very construction of the public spaces so that the most important people were elevated in public view on higher platforms and pedestals. To get ahead in Ephesus one had to be part of the elaborate religious system of patronage—to contribute to the civic and religious projects one's patron contributed to, and to show up and be present to support them showing everyone else how influential the patron really was. To get ahead in Ephesus one had to buy into the public values of family patriarchy, of male domination of the family and community, of chastity as a way of keeping women under control, the public values of triumph, victory, and the right to vengeance. One had to accept that life and fate were controlled by unpredictable forces, or that they might fall under the control of the dark power of a manipulator. To get ahead in Ephesus one had to be religious—one had to accept the power of religious leaders to set the rules, the right of the wealthiest men to establish the pecking order in every hierarchy and to expect cooperation and conformity in right behaviour and correct religious practice—because what was most important in Ephesus was civic and religious **unity**.

In the face of all that, the letter to the Ephesians takes up several key Pauline themes. There is a mystery in the universe—but it is not the random control of heavenly powers, it is not the rule of vengeance, triumph and victory. Rather the mystery which rules our fates and rules the universe is the fact that our lives are in God's hand, and that God's will is for mercy. God's is a plan for generosity to the entire human race from before all time, expressed through Jesus Christ whose purpose is to bring all things together into a different kind of unity, a unity not of the great thundering shout as one man killed another in the great public games in a gesture of triumph, but the unity of mutual love, of forbearance, of respect and care.

52. After whom the running shoes were named.

Ephesians speaks of a unity and reconciliation which come about because our attention is not given to the distractions of being religious and doing religious things in order to fit in to society, to be respected, to be seen as moral and upstanding, and to bring respect to one's particular social group. Rather, in Ephesians our attention is focused on Christ. Christ is mentioned by name in over half the 23 verses of the first chapter of this letter, and is referred to indirectly in almost every other verse of the opening chapter. Our attention is focused on Christ because Christ becomes the pattern for our lives, not the requirements of religious and moral propriety, which can gain us nothing. It is purely by God's graciousness and generosity that we have been delivered, made alive, and raised up to heavenly places with Christ—"For by grace you have been saved by faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast." Along with a few passages in Romans and Corinthians, the entire book of Ephesians is the New Testament's great gospel confrontation with "religion"—a continuation of the great Pauline assertion that to be in Christ is to be freed forever for God and to be freed forever from all the bonds of human religion that measures acceptableness to God through checklists, moral standards, and performance of religious duties.⁵³

To be in Christ for the letter to the Ephesians is not to be under the sway of mysterious heavenly powers controlling our lives we know not how, it is not to be to a good cog in the socio-economic structure of a large, wealthy, powerful and hierarchical community, it is not to share the resentments of the community against outsiders and strangers, it is not to buy into the norms of traditional family structures. On the contrary, to be in Christ for Ephesians is to be constantly again at the moment of the world's creation—"To be what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

To be in Christ is to have left death behind, and to have left behind a past in which we were caught in death. In that great ancient city of Ephesus, to be in Christ was to have left behind the "course of this world," to have left behind following the "powers of the air"—the fear of fate, the belief in vengeance as the only mechanism for justice, the belief that the triumph of the strong over the weak is the law of the universe. We know from other early Christian writings that the community in Ephesus was constantly drawn back into the values of the surrounding community. We know that it became a place of criticism and judgment of other Christians;⁵⁴ and that while they were experts at discerning the "truly faithful" from the "doctrinally erring," the community had lost its original love—love for one another and love for Jesus Christ. It is easy to assume that the term "the disobedient" early in the book refers to wicked non-believers still caught in sin. We can also read this passage as suggesting that already when the letter is being written, Christians in Ephesus are turning the glorious freedom faith in Christ Jesus that can do more than we can ask or imagine into a new religion—one which will be more acceptable to the values and morality of the Greco-Roman community rather than confronting it with a truly different way. Ephesians also reminds us that the freedom God has given us in Christ is not the freedom of the brothels or of the marketplace or of the amphitheatre—it is not the freedom to "follow the desires of flesh and senses." The Ephesian Christians were once part of that city, once lived in that city on its terms, and like everyone else, were caught up in its power—they were children of wrath, children of anger, children of vengeance, victims and wielders of the powers of fear and darkness, buyers and sellers in the marketplace of desire and greed and patronage and social conformity. But something has changed all that—they can look forward to good works, the works that God prepared beforehand to be their new way of life.

53. Ephesians is as frightening a letter for Anglicans today to read as it was for the first century Ephesians who first received it, because it calls into question so many things we take for granted, including the common assumption in many Anglican circles that Christianity is simply another religion intended to unify society through teaching values and morality.

54. Legend recounts that at the end of his life St John could think of nothing more necessary to tell the Christians in Ephesus than that they needed to learn to love one another.

Ephesians articulates the mystery of the Ascension of Christ. God is rich in mercy, and God loved us out of an endless outpouring of great love—even when we were dead through our wrongdoing. God has made us alive together with Christ and has raised us with Christ and seated us in Christ in the heavenly places, so that God may continue to show us in all times and ages the immeasurable riches of grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. But this is the exact inversion of the life of Ephesus where the goddess comes down to earth in the form of a rigid inflexible statue to impose a merciless law, a fixed social structure and rigid moral order promising to ensure the stability and success of society.

So it is in the latter part of Ephesians we find the most forceful attack anywhere in the New Testament on the values of patriarchy—it is clear from the repeated address to the *paterfamilias* in the house-table that it is the assumptions of men that they have the total right to control the lives of their wives, children and slaves that the writer is rebuking over and over again in this passage. You cannot have the family values of Artemis and Diana if you are part of the Community, Body, and Family of which Christ is the true head. Not only is the patriarchal power of the *paterfamilias* displaced by being set under Christ, but the entire house-table is framed with the principle of mutuality in relationship: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Again we find a return not to the illusion of the fallen world of Genesis 3 as the proper ordering of creation, but to the priority of mutual interrelation of the *‘ezer kenegdo* partnership of Genesis 2.

6. Marriage in the Bible

This much broader framework (it could be extended considerably) of how I understand the biblical texts to articulate a foundational critique and rejection of patriarchy and its links to the fallenness of human religion, lead to some further reflection on how I understand the biblical presentation of marriage and more broadly, sexuality and sexual desire. It will be clear from what I have said already about *Ba'alism*, in particular, that “marriage” as a socio-economic and socio-religious reality is intimately linked to everything that is depraved in this most complex form of “religion” which the prophets denounce.

The Institution of Marriage

I understand the biblical text to view marriage as one of an immense range of institutions that exists in human society—among them cities, kingship, law, elders, various forms of prophetic or critique movements, priesthoods, sanctuaries, temples, particular forms of worship such as sacrifice, armies etc. While in the biblical texts we can find occasional statements in some way articulating some sort of divine “authority” for their existence, over the broad range of texts they are much more frequently portrayed as failures, as causes of evil, and under judgement. As much as any institution may be at some moment a manifestation of God’s grace and providence, the texts are clear that all institutions sooner or later become allied and incorporated into the Fall. Because of their fundamental nature as manifestations of social continuity, they become the places in which, in our rejection and abandonment of God, we place our faith, hope and trust. In this, I understand the scriptures to articulate a perspective that no institution is of the *‘esse’* of grace.⁵⁵ In this, marriage is no different.

55. In fact, I understand this to be an essential part of the import of the letters to the seven churches in the Apocalypse of John. Even the Church is not of the *esse* of grace: it too, as soon as it comes into existence, becomes subject to all the temptations of religion and at risk of falling away from Jesus Christ. This is even more clearly reinforced in virtually every Petrine passage in the New Testament—Peter is named by Jesus as the rock on which the church will be built, not as the “head” who will rule the church. Peter and Jesus are the subjects of the only two killing miracles in the synoptic tradition. Jesus appears to cause the death of a fig tree that does not bear fruit. Peter causes the death of two humans, Ananias and Sapphira: this

In this light, I understand the etiological statement of Genesis 2:24 to point to the human institution of marriage but only in the most general way as the manifestation of God's intention in creation that the human being should not be lonely but have an *'ezer kenegdo*. What God intended was human partnership, not some particular form of social institution. The text speaks of the *'ish* leaving parents and cleaving to his *'issah* and the two becoming one flesh, nothing more. The text does not denote marriage, but in the light of what precedes it, it does denote that when the relationship that is the *'ezer kenegdo* is found, that the relationship involves a **severing** of fundamental relations of authority, subjection, affection, and economic power. It also appropriately involves entry into a sexual relationship, denoted first by the verb *DBQ*, "to cleave," conveying not only essentiality of connection like skin to bone but intimacy of relationship, and then by the term *basar*, "flesh," which implies not merely physical flesh but the familial intimacy of "blood-flesh." It is here that we can see an intimation of something that might point to a social institution—in most societies, the creation of new kinship bonds have specific social and institutional forms and manifestations. Marriage is obviously only one; adoption is another created form of kinship which we should note as one of Paul's preferred metaphors for the salvific work wrought in us through Jesus Christ.⁵⁶ But Genesis 2:24 simply asserts that it is the drive to find the *'ezer kenegdo* which results in the severing of one set of relationships and entry into a new relationship of intimacy and partnership as a fundamental pattern of human behaviour.⁵⁷

We encounter narratives portraying marriages throughout the Bible—they form substantive portions of Genesis, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, to a lesser extent 1 and 2 Kings. What we cannot escape is that no account of a specific marriage relationship in the major strands of the narrative tradition portrays marriage in a positive light: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob with Rachel and Leah, and later, Elkanah with Hannah and Peninah, Abigail and Nabal, or all the marriages of David. Though there are momentary flashes that might be construed as "affection" (e.g. Elkanah saying to Hannah, "Am I not more to you than ten sons?" and missing the point completely), for the most part all the narratives lay open the depth of the problematic of patriarchy when it infects this basic social institution. Where Tolstoy observes, "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," the biblical version of the comment might simply read "Each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

story, with its focus on the economic power of the emergent Church, that conveys the ambiguity and attraction of power and money and their ability to pervert. From the historical perspective of the formation of the canon I understand the entire Petrine critique as part of the larger early Christian critique of the emergent pretensions of Rome to authority over the Church and also as resistance to the Ignatian and other preoccupations with episcopacy and authority in the late first century.

56. One of the most important books on this in the Western European and English social and religious tradition is Alan Bray's study *The Friend*, which outlines the social and religious patterns and rituals under which kinship relations parallel or equivalent to marriage were constructed between the eleventh and mid-eighteenth century. The study is significant not only for illuminating shifting views of such relationships across time, as well as their persistence, but for his substantive re-reading of the significance of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* in the light of the physical and textual remains from all periods showing how these relationships were understood to point in a crucial and theologically illuminating way to central aspects of the saving work of Christ.

57. Clearly then, I consider the address in the *Book of Common Prayer's* "Order for the Solemnization of Matrimony" to go considerably beyond the text of Genesis, not in asserting that marriage is an "honourable estate" (our text actually confirms that partnership is at the heart of God's creative purpose for the human being), but in asserting that "marriage" was "instituted by God in the time of [man's] innocency."

I understand these texts then to offer a persistent critique of any normalization or idealization of a mode of marriage as being the “biblical ideal”—there is only the biblical reality which is consistently dysfunctionality, rivalry, deceit, manipulation, violence, suspicion and acquisition. But this gives rise to several crucial observations:

1. In the biblical texts, despite the overwhelming portrayal of marriage (because it’s the central institution of the patriarchal order) as the heart of human brokenness and dysfunction, these marriages are also places and moments out of which grace and hope for deliverance arise. But the texts make clear over and over again that this is **not** the result of human acceptance and use of the accepted cultural or societal “norms” of marriage, but precisely through God’s action to disrupt those assumptions. Abraham and Sarah become the father and mother of **nations** because they adopt the cultural practice of impregnating the wife’s slave-maid, but they become the father and mother of the people of the **covenant** because God speaks the Word in the home of their hospitality. All generations will sing of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, as Deborah summons her hearers to do; Jael is “blessed beyond all women in tents” because she abandons the conventions of patriarchal hospitality and murders Sisera, the general of the oppressing Canaanites, in her husband’s tent.⁵⁸ Abigail (with equal parts of opportunism and foresight) abandons her abusive husband Nabal to ally herself and then to marry with David, but in doing so preserves him from incurring even more blood-guilt. The adulterous relationship between David and Bathsheba founded in spousal murder leads to judgement, death of the innocent, and pain, but it also leads to Solomon. The greatest single deliverance in Israel’s history, under the threat of total genocide rising from the hatred of Hamaan, stems from the choices of Esther—an orphan with no “normal” family, the royal “special” in a large harem of sexual partners for a Persian emperor. These patterns are not limited to these narratives. At least one gospel narrative describes Joseph as continuing his relationship with Mary his betrothed only as a matter of reconsidered judgement and abandonment of the norms to which he was accustomed. At its best, marriage is ambiguously “bad” and “good” throughout the texts, a place of darkness and despair, and a place where God releases hope and possibility.
2. The narrative texts nowhere presuppose our modern (post nineteenth century) notions about marriage. Marriage is shown clearly to be linked to varied conceptions of property (both wives and children as property [e.g. Genesis 20, Genesis 31:43] and the acquisition and the exchange of property [e.g. the Jacob cycle]); to conceptions of political and social power (see especially 2 Samuel 3 but also more generally 1 and 2 Samuel); to the exercise of economic power (e.g. 1 Kings 21); to religious obligation and affiliation (again the Ahab cycle, but also 1 Kings 11); to matters of sexual control, “purity,” and punishment (again 2 Samuel 3, and also 2 Samuel 20). If we were to articulate a biblical “norm” of marriage it would have to include these things.⁵⁹

While the legal material in the Torah regulates various aspects of marriage within the framework of patriarchal assumptions about its structure as an institution, there is one unique portion of legal-ritual material. The book of Numbers articulates what we might see as several elaborate and arcane rituals—among these the *sotah* for cases of

58. And lest we not understand, Deborah goes on to portray Sisera’s mother and her handmaids waiting at their latticed windows, locked into the assumptions their men have inculcated, waiting dutifully for the men to come home with the spoil seized from the oppressed (Judges 5-28-30).

59. The texts also make us aware of the degree to which contemporary illusions and conceptions of marriage simply mask these same dynamics and exchanges of social, economic and political power. It is precisely in this area that contemporary Christian discourse about marriage is so trivial and naïve—the Bible tells us much more honestly than the introduction to the marriage ceremony in our prayer books what we are really talking about when we talk about “marriage.”

adultery and jealousy; the Nazirite vow and sacrificial ritual for withdrawal from communal life; the cities of refuge for accidental killings. What these share in common is a concern for establishing bounds to the breakdown of communal life, to ritualize and limit the illimitable, and to bound the chaotic and destructive forces of communal disruption.

Numbers 5 recounts in detail the ritual of the *sotah*, used when a man becomes jealous and convinced (with or without evidence) that his wife has been adulterous. The *sotah* ritual takes place because the woman **may** be living out a lack of differentiation and boundaries—sleeping with any man. But equally it reflects her husband's lack of differentiation in being overcome with jealousy, a term the text reiterates verse after verse. He's lost track of the boundary between himself and his wife and imagines she is simply his object. Both need to be bounded to avoid societal breakdown. Critical to understanding this ritual is that the job of the priestly leader is to discern what the issue really is—it's the priest who in the end mixes the drink and thus determines the outcome of the test. I understand this text again as a critique of the normative understandings of marriage projected by patriarchy. The reiterated insistence of the text on the husband's jealousy in balance with the supposition of the woman's looseness again hold up to scrutiny the patriarchal construction of marriage. In doing so, marriage is exposed as fundamentally a place where male proprietary rage must be brought under control and given societal boundaries, and where male neurotic suspicion of the spouse must be revealed as exactly that, suspicion and false accusation. Despite what it appears superficially to be, this is in fact a ritual for the protection of women in abusive and dysfunctional marriages.

David, and Marriage as Tool for Male Socialization

This process is most explicit in the series of texts which unfold between 1 Samuel 16 and 2 Samuel 5—the prolonged narrative of David's extended liminal formation to be king between his secret anointing by Samuel and his final aggregation as king at Hebron.⁶⁰ This series of narratives provokes the problematic of patriarchal marriage at its most intense, because the very first “marriage” David contracts is with a male, namely Jonathan, the son of Saul (then king, and ultimately David's enemy). The relationship is portrayed as a marriage in a variety of ways: there is explicit use of covenanting and kinship language at various points; the relationship is of a significance that one partner is willing to abandon his birthright as oldest son of Saul for the relationship; and David himself abides by the covenanted obligations to Jonathan's offspring at all crucial moments in the ensuing narrative. In whatever way we would wish to understand David's motivations in entering this “marriage” (constructed kinship relationship), his own last word on the relationship epitomizes Jonathan's love as something “wonderful, beyond the love of women.” It is precisely

60. The academic foundations for this reading were first given as the paper *Sex in the Messianic Age: David's Relationships as Fore Play* at the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies in 1992. I have reframed the matter in crucial ways in this context. Robert A. J. Gagnon takes up this material in 1 Samuel and other recent comment on it in his *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001). Generally I find Gagnon's work flawed in several ways. First he starts with a conclusion which he then proceeds to find in every text he takes up. Secondly, many of his readings are superficial and decontextualize passages from their canonical framework (as in his reading of the David and Jonathan material), beginning with some outright misreadings of general ancient near-eastern texts. Thirdly, he is generally dismissive of most feminist or other commentary on the texts, and seemingly not able to grasp the complexity of the positions they lay out—thus this material does not figure adequately into his narrative or other hermeneutics. Fourthly, his model is excessively historicist (but in the very limited sense of history that permeates so much historical criticism) and he often treats texts as if they are transparent windows to meaning. But it is a good exemplar of the contemporary modern entanglement of sexuality with “religion.”

the retention of the poem in 1 Samuel 1 that problematizes our understanding of this relationship—what is going on between David and Jonathan cannot simply be dismissed as “good buddies,” or “strategic allies.”

The text takes this problematizing further, because it shows Saul, who has adopted David into his household for a variety of reasons, as deeply disturbed by the relationship (e.g. the instance of abuse of Jonathan identified earlier, the language of which moves beyond simple dynastic anxiety). Saul’s solution is to set up an “appropriate” marriage for David—namely with Michal, Saul’s daughter. This marriage epitomizes all the assumptions of patriarchy about socializing young males into appropriate forms of relationship, about dislocation of clan and familial loyalty through marriage, and about the use of women as objects in social exchanges of power and loyalty. The text then exposes the dirty underbelly of these dynamics as the narrative portrays Michal as abandoning loyalty to her paternal clan for David, then her being taken back by Saul and used again as exchange item in a new alliance (he marries Michal to another man), and finally her being humiliated as David forces her second husband to give her up in a public display of power. The climax of the narrative occurs at the point where David brings the Ark to Jerusalem. In this episode the text points to the establishment of formalized religion at the same time as points to the utter dysfunctionality of this form of marriage—both in Michal’s mockery of the husband who has accepted, used, and humiliated her as an object of exchanges of power (she points out that by dancing naked he exposes what should be reserved for the marital bed to the servant girls), and in David’s further exercise of power by excluding her from intimacy and progeny which he justifies by the claim the God has authorized him to have power.

As the narrative unfolds David’s marriages function repeatedly as strategic alliances—but part of the ambiguity of the text is that David himself manifests total detachment. The texts do not portray David as an emotionless figure—of all biblical characters, David is the most fully drawn both in his own responses and in the responses he elicits from others. While the canonical shaping of the texts implies that we are to understand David as the prototype or the archetype of the *mashiah*, the Anointed One to come, and the texts suggest a wide range of ways in which we are to construe them as such—political, religious, social, economic, and even David’s own private devotion to and acceptance of God’s will and judgements, the texts also show David and his family as deeply flawed and dysfunctional.⁶¹

A crucial moment in this narrative is the words spoken to David at Hebron when all the tribes come together to (re)anoint David king. This moment marks the end of the long liminal journey of socialization into kingship for David, and the people say “Look we are your bone and flesh...” This echoing of the words of the *’adam* in Genesis 2 I understand to be deliberate—David is the appropriate *’ezer kenegdo* for the whole people of Israel, people and king are like man and woman in relationship. But this allusion also points us to another aspect of these texts. The long narrative of liminality draws our attention to the process of socialization into appropriate intimate, familial, and clan, and dynastic relationships that patriarchal marriage represents. But all our texts reveal David, the *mashiah*, as a person whose instincts are fundamentally homophilic—Jonathan, Joab, all the sons and especially Absalom. Again, it is a superficial read to say that this is simply the nature of relationships in the ancient world. By drawing attention to this aspect of David’s life in narrative form (which the authors and redactors were not obligated to do—see the counter-version in Chronicles for the most obvious example), the texts draw our attention to the reality that the dysfunction and collapse of David’s kingdom lies in part in the patriarchal assumption that homophilic instincts

61. Obviously, this is most true in the long narrative that unfolds beginning with Amnon’s rape of Tamar, and David’s unwillingness to act, but it proceeds then through the increasingly disrupted familial relations, the rebellion of Absalom which points to the breakdown of civil justice external to David’s family in parallel with its internal breakdown (1 Samuel 15), and ultimately to the second civil war which follows his death. The narrative nowhere allows us to consider all this merely as “political;” it is constantly refracted through the lens of the “familial.”

must be desocialized precisely because they are a threat to the entire elaboration and construction of patriarchy's normalizing order. This is precisely a part of the prophetic message of Samuel as a former prophet. What most warps David's natural gifts and instincts for productive human partnership and allegiance (presumably the reason God chooses him in the first place) is the process by which these instincts are abnegated by the process of his socialization until they become the root of personal inability to act wisely or justly, the root of familial chaos, the root of social and political chaos, and finally the root of a cycle of increasing violence extending into the opening narratives of 1 Kings.

The other body of texts where we see a similar portrayal of a socio-political process articulated through an "ideology" involving marriage is in Ezra and Nehemiah where ethnic cleansing is enacted through social opprobrium exerted with the objective of disrupting existing marriages and putting away wives and families for socio-political objectives. Even more obviously here we see the way in which religious motivation becomes attached to this process. In Ezra the ostensible "purpose" of analyzing the purity of bloodlines is to ensure obedience to the regulations regarding priestly marriages. In Nehemiah we see this process extended to a "purification" of all the people, a process by which xenophobia becomes normalized through being instituted and interpolated into a fundamental societal institution.

Ruth and Song of Songs as Critique of Marriage as a Socio-Political Tool

If there is a text which sits both in response to Ezra and Nehemiah and to the accounts of David's socialization through marriage in 1 and 2 Samuel, it would be Ruth.⁶² This short narrative centres around a woman's desire and need for marriage to ensure economic stability for herself and her mother-in-law in a patriarchal structure where men are operating out of self-interest and unwilling to accept even the basic obligations articulated by their particular form of patriarchal social structuring. When Ruth goes to glean, the narrative implies at a variety of points a climate where unmarried women are subjected to harassment and potential rape, from which she is protected only by the "sponsorship" of Boaz. The text is clear that Ruth is obliged to offer herself as a sex object to Boaz, despite having drawn his attention to her situation, in order to provoke him to action. The crucial issue in the text is her foreign status as a Moabite woman (thus the perceived link to Nehemiah 13) and therefore a proscribed marriage partner in the Deuteronomic laws.⁶³ Ruth, through her marriage to Boaz becomes the grandmother of David, but the text goes further in tracing Boaz's ancestry in the Judahite clan to Perez, one of the twin offspring of Tamar, who for similar reasons of male refusal to fulfil marital obligations found it necessary to trick her father-in-law Judah into sleeping with her and impregnating her. Thus not only is David, the *mashiah*, not eligible to be a part of the assembly of Israel because he is only three generations descended from a Moabite woman, but the genealogy back to Judah through Perez is only just ten generations. The narrative by implication makes the great David ineligible

62. Significantly, the text itself bears this ambiguity within it. Most scholars judge the narrative to be a product of the post-exilic period, and an explicit response to and critique of the xenophobia of Ezra and Nehemiah. But the narrative of Ruth is told in an antique form of Hebrew, going so far as to distinguish carefully the speech patterns of the older and younger generations in the story. The narrative places itself in the pre-Davidic era, identifying itself with the period of social breakdown and chaos at the end of the book of Judges (whence its placement in the Greek ordering of the canon).

63. "Those born of an illicit union shall not be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord..." (Deuteronomy 23:2-3).

for two Deuteronomic reasons—Ruth’s and Boaz’s inappropriate marriage, and Judah’s and Tamar’s illicit relationship. Here again, the inner-biblical dialogue stands in critique of the norms and assumptions even of its own legal proscriptions, and of the model of patriarchal marital order adopted during the period of Ezra and Nehemiah. The text articulates this not only by the tracing of David’s ancestry to Ruth, but by intimating that from the marriage of Ruth and Boaz, Naomi (Ruth’s mother-in-law) herself is restored to wholeness of identity and purpose which is no longer dependent on her own marital status or that of her deceased sons (1:19ff and 4:13ff). Wholeness, fertility, stability, and the future restoration of the brokenness of the entire people of Israel arise from this foreign woman who chooses loyalty to Israel’s God, who chooses loyalty to another woman, and who chooses fidelity and integrity in all her relationships. From this, not from the failed norms and structures of patriarchal marriage, comes the promise of salvation.

The second significant text, which I understand as a critique of all other biblical texts portraying or regulating marriage is the Song of Songs. At its basic level the text is a collection of love poems, articulating in charged erotic language the longing of two lovers for one another. The text suggests at various points that they have been sexually intimate, but it is very clear that they are not married, although the form and context of some part of the text suggest that they may be “marriage” songs. The text is in the canon because from early times it was interpreted as an allegory of the passionate love between God and Israel, and the text has a long history in the Christian tradition of similar allegorical interpretation. I understand the text to function within the canon in several ways.

1. Insofar as Song of Songs speaks about erotic human relationships, it conveys these as **mutual interactions**—these are almost the only biblical texts in which both partners (female and male) speak openly and freely and extensively to one another. The texts thus represent a restoration of fallen human language as well as fallen human sexuality.
2. The Song portrays the restoration of fallen human sexuality not as the successful implementation of some norm or pattern of marriage but as **freedom of erotic longing and congress** (in fact portions of the text intimate the disapproval of the city fathers and guardians of propriety for the woman who dares to express her love and desire so openly).
3. The Song appears to have taken on its allegorical freight in a very early period, and therefore functions in part as a critique of the sacral marriage ideology of both the *Baal* cult (and all its social ramifications) and in other near-eastern forms of religion (e.g. divine kingship cults). Marriage in the Song is **not linked in any way to procreation or fertility but to mutual responsiveness and pleasure**—if this is what Divine love and marriage is to be, then procreation and fertility must also be delinked from our understanding of human marriage.
4. By connecting the Song to the person of Solomon (an extension of the connection of the entire wisdom tradition to Solomon) there is an implicit critique of marriage as a socio-political form (Solomon marries all the women to forge foreign alliances). But it also an implicit overturning and disruption of the intimate connection between marriage and religion (Solomon’s idolatry is the result of his marriages where sexual intimacy and social structure implicitly draw him more and more away from Israel’s God and into the practice of “religion”). Song of Songs intimates that **only through the abandonment of the social construct and institution of marriage as a foundational presupposition for intimate relationship can we free ourselves of the temptation to fall into “religion” and offer ourselves wholly and unreservedly to God as partner.**⁶⁴

64. Luke 20, Mark 12, Matthew 22 on marriage and the resurrection. The Song only refers to the partner as “bride” in a brief sequence in chapter 4, and at each occurrence of the actual term for “bride” it couples it with the term “my sister.”

Marriage as Changing Social Institution

I understand the Bible as a whole to portray marriage not only as the social institution in which the fallen state of humanity is most acutely played out (as well as the surreptitious grace of God), but also as a human institution which changes form and structure over time. This is made evident both in the different forms of marriage which we see in the scriptures: unions of two partners, unions of one male with multiple females, unions with multiple partners and harems etc, unions in which a male has a “married” wife and another form of “spousal arrangement” located in a different place. Again, we simply cannot state that there is one biblical norm of marriage—the texts will not sustain such a proposition. Against this we could say that across the entire spectrum of the canon (both parts of the canon) we can perceive a growing preference for a form of marriage in which two individuals partner in a committed relationship. The very fact that an early Christian canonical text has to specify that those charged with *episcopate* should be the husband of only one spouse indicates that even the early Christian community was one in which there were divergent patterns of marital norms.⁶⁵

Judges and the Dynamics of Change in Marriage as an Institution

From this perspective the most significant book of the entire Bible is the book of Judges in the Former Prophets. I understand the primary force of its prophetic function to relate to precisely this matter of change in marriage from one form of social construct to another, and its ramifications in relation to how such social changes are negotiated and managed by communities.⁶⁶ While the book points to dynamics which would be arguably true for all social groups, the prophetic force of the book comes from its narration of the disastrous way in which God’s people negotiated this particular form of social change—prophetic because the narrative of the past (as presented) becomes warning for the future.

65. But whether this is theological or purely pragmatic in 1 Timothy is a matter for discussion. The rest of the passage gives no evidence of particular theological concern, being almost exclusively preoccupied with pragmatic matters of capacity, energy and credibility. I would identify Timothy as marking a distinct turning away from the gospels and much of Paul on matters relating to marriage—it shows us (as noted earlier) the decline of Christianity into “religion” and forms of “religion” marked by social acceptability, and exercise and structures of power and control. In saying this I am not offering a new argument. Again, I would identify all these parts of the canon as mutually dialogical—all are faithful testimonies in their context. Note that Origen in his hermeneutic introduction to the Commentary on John articulates the well-established principle that the Epistles, even those of Paul, while worthy and carrying authority, carry it only in subsidiarity to the Gospels and the actions and teachings of Jesus.

66. My thinking rests on the foundation of the important 1988 study by Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: the Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press). Her work moves in a different direction than mine, but was crucial in clarifying for me what was the prophetic function of Judges. Her crucial insights lie first in her insistence that the redacted canonical form of the book was intended to be understood as a whole and that previous scholarship with its focus on historical issues of the settlement of Israel, the nature of political government in the period of the Judges, and the superficial focus on disobedience and idolatry, had systematically sidelined the most problematic portions of the book (the last five chapters and in particular the final three with its narrative of escalating violence and intra-communal tension). Against this she offers a substantially more coherent reading that integrates all parts of the book and offers a richer account of all aspects of the book. Her second crucial insight lies in her articulation of the alternate forms of marriage coded in Judges by the repeated use of the term *pilegesh* to indicate a different type of spousal arrangement. While subsequent scholarship has questioned Bal’s premise, I see no better account that bases itself in the texts themselves—the distinctions she evokes are all there in the language and narratives of the book itself.

The book of Judges presents a series of narratives in which the term *pilegesh* appears frequently (more than in any other single book of the canon). Conventionally translated as “concubine,” the term is likely more accurately rendered, based on the distinctions of the narratives themselves, as “patrilocal wife.” A patrilocal wife is one who continues to reside in the household of her father (patrilocal—located with the father); the husband thus must move away from his own clan/family and knit into the socio-economic ambit of the spouse’s family. The alternative is virilocal marriage (virilocal—located with the man). In virilocal marriage, by contrast, the woman moves to her husband and thus becomes more tightly knit into the socio-economic ambit of his family/clan. What is clear in the narratives (including narratives that do not use the term specifically) is that there are at least these two types of operative family structure—not simply multiple wives and families, but wives and families of significantly different status—and that the coexistence of these is the source of considerable social stress that then manifests itself in the particular characters of several of the Judges.

The narrative in which this is most acute is the account of the Levite and his *'issah pilegesh*, his “*pilegesh* or patrilocal wife” (chapters 19–21), and it is here that the alternative structure of the marriage is also most evident. The *pilegesh* wife leaves him to live with her father, and when he goes to bring her back to live with him a prolonged struggle ensues between himself and her father, in which the father seeks to persuade the Levite to stay with him. This is not merely good hospitality, but the crux of the marital issue. The *pilegesh* wife’s father seeks to hold the Levite in this older social form of marriage in which the man moves into the woman’s father’s house (thus patrilocal, “with the father”). The Levite himself wants the woman to return to his own household, to live as a virilocal wife as has become the norm in the region in which he lives. In Judges 19–21 this is made quite clear, but retrospectively, it illuminates the origins of the repeated social tensions articulated within the narratives. Many of the male characters (most notably Samson) are involved in relationships that require them to travel and live with their women (in Samson’s case, with an enemy Philistine woman).

Re-examined, the opening narrative of the book, about Caleb, his daughter Ahsah, and Othniel, the man to whom Caleb gives her, appears to be a non-narrative. Othniel, dissatisfied with the “dowry” provided, sends Ahsah back to Caleb to ask for better land. Caleb acquiesces in the request and the story concludes. But the internal tension is the same—whether the property moves with the wife from the economic and power ambit of the father (patrilocal) to the husband (virilocal). The narrative manifests little tension because Caleb recognizes and acquiesces in the social change under negotiation. The social change is not insignificant in a clan system with an economic base of subsistence agriculture or herding—the location of both people, progeny, and the flow of economic resources are crucial matters, and alteration to a fundamental institution such as marriage carries huge implications for potential destabilizing and reshaping of the existing bases of power and order. The book of Judges enacts various aspects of this across its narrative material, where it is often implicit or in the background of other forms of social disruption.

The concluding narratives focus on the same tension between marital forms, but this time the social change is not acknowledged or successfully negotiated. The Levite takes his wife away, but is forced to spend the night in the Benjaminite city of Gibeah. The men of the city demand the man to rape him, but his host demurs. In the end the Levite puts his *pilegesh* wife outside the door and she is raped and abused all night by the men of Gibeah. In the morning the Levite throws the woman on his donkey, takes her home, cuts her up into pieces (the narrative never discloses whether the *pilegesh* wife is dead or alive) and sends them to all the other tribes demanding that they come to punish the Benjaminites. In the battle that ensues, all the Benjaminite men are killed, and so an annual ritual of “rape” is instituted so that the Benjaminite women will not be without “men” and progeny.

Clearly more is going on in the story than punishment for bad hospitality. Nor is it the Levite who suffers rape and violence—so the story cannot be construed as a disapproval and punishment of male rape. I understand this story with several other contemporary interpreters to be a narrative in which the threat/desire to rape the Levite and the actual rape of his *pilegesh* wife are both real, in the sense that they narrate an account in which both the desire to rape and the actual act of rape are real, but also symbolic. The sin of the inhabitants of Gibeah and more broadly of

the Benjaminites for which they must be punished by the other Israelites is their refusal to accept virilocal marriage (made doubly clear in the outcome of the annual ritual of rape and forced marriage). The relationship of the Levite and his *pilegesh* wife, his refusal to stay with the father, his passing through the Benjaminite territory on the way to his own home—all these are both real and symbolic narrative enactments of the process of change in social structures. So too is the violence of the Gibeahites against the Levite and the *pilegesh* wife a real and symbolic enactment of their refusal to accept the change in social structures and the concomitant desire to enforce a return to the older social structure. The narrative re-enacts with ever increasing violence the process of enforced social change. Killing the Benjaminite men ensures that they will never again be able to practice patrilocal marriage,⁶⁷ and it equally ensures that the women can be forced to practice virilocal marriage. Judges 21 opens by recalling that all the other Israelites had taken an oath not to allow their daughters to marry Benjaminites as another mechanism for withholding their “participation” in patrilocality. But in a patriarchal clan and tribal structure, the only way the males can now envision preserving the nearly defunct tribe is by a further act of violence in slaying all the men and married women of the one community that had not participated in the violence and oath (Jabesh-Gilead). This creates yet another violated female “body.” Jabesh-Gilead’s unmarried, “pure” and now “communityless” women to become victims in a new annual formalized ritual of rape for the remaining few Benjaminite men to enact as a mechanism for finding wives.

The book of Judges portrays this process of social change as one which takes a long period of time. By framing the book with an account at the outset of the successful negotiation of change in the form of marriage, and at its conclusion with the sequel of violence where after substantial time the negotiation of social change has not been effected or accepted, the book highlights both the reality of the process of social change, and the implications of our choices in responding to and accepting social change. But the book is also about change in the form of marriage, a foundational institution. So Judges functions as a prophetic book in at least three important ways:

- 1) It calls into question and judges our illusions about the stability of even our most intimate institutions, and particularly our illusions that there is one “correct” form of marriage.
- 2) It again demonstrates the link between violence, patriarchy and embedded forms of institutional life, especially of marriage.
- 3) It reminds us that we are judged by the choices we make in negotiating our way through processes of social change—and this judgement lies on the one hand in the increasing violence we will participate in as displacement for our anxiety and resistance (we too can become like the men of Gibeah), and on the other hand in the increasing and spiraling violence which will be the fate of the weak (in matters of marital and family structure, always the women and children).

In this complex way, by making us aware of the historical reality of change in the form of marriage, of the time frames over which such change unfolds (more than one human lifetime), of the tensions at all levels such changes evoke, and of the implications of well-negotiated and of unnegotiated or refused change, Judges renders all icons or images of the institution marriage as subject to historical process, contingent, and thus matters indifferent. What Judges is not indifferent to is the violence that springs from our overinvestment in such matters indifferent. Who is the last Judge in the book? I understand this figure to be the *pilegesh* wife of the Levite, whose violated body,

67. Note that Judges 21 opens by recalling that all the other Israelites has taken an oath not to allow their daughters to marry Benjaminites as another mechanism for withholding their “participation” in patrilocality.

dismembered live by the hands of her husband (a religious leader), poses to the Israelites the Spirit's question: "Has such a thing ever happened since the day the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until this day? Consider it, take counsel, and speak out."

Marriage in Early Christianity: Compromise and Counter-culture in Greco-Roman world

Understanding the institution of marriage in the Old Testament as a fundamental manifestation of the fallen state of humanity, captive to patriarchy and the embodiment of its worst abuses and manifestations, captivated by the power and seductive force of religion, and subject to historical and social evolution in form and norms, yet also occasionally the locus of the mystery of the workings of God's grace and salvation—this entire broad framework forms the background for what I understand to be essential elements in the early Christian approach to marriage. I will not take up every detail, but wish to elucidate what I understand to be key threads.

First, the Gospels portray an ambivalence toward marriage at several levels. The most notable of these is the conflicting accounts of Jesus teachings and participation in rabbinic debates and about divorce.⁶⁸ It is a longstanding and probably accurate truism that Jesus siding with the more conservative rabbinic tradition in not permitting divorce except on the grounds of unchastity is a choice on Jesus' part to insist on better treatment of women, since it prohibits men from divorcing on whim, mere dissatisfaction, desire for a new partner or a more fertile partner, or more frivolous grounds. The opposite side of this proposition is that the prohibition on marrying a divorced woman thus renders her in double jeopardy.

The version of this discussion in Matthew 19 (paralleled in Mark 10), however, renders this a more complex discussion.⁶⁹ On the one hand Jesus appears to point to texts from Genesis 1 and 2 as a divine foundation for marriage

68. Matthew 5:31ff: "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

69. Matthew 19:3ff: "Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?' He answered, 'Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning "made them male and female," and said, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?" So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. They said to him, 'Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?' He said to them, 'It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but at the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.' His disciples said to him, 'If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.' But he said to them, 'Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.'"

Mark 10:2ff: "Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.' But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female." "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.' Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'"

as an institution, thus making it inviolable. When challenged with the provision of Mosaic law permitting divorce, Jesus shifts ground, evoking the failure of human love and forgiveness—the need for divorce is a manifestation of the fallen nature of humanity (“at the beginning it was not so”). Here Matthew and Mark part ways. Matthew’s disciples now proceed to a further discussion about whether marriage is then a desirable good at all. In response, Jesus articulates first of all a qualification, which in the logic of the conversation would seem to refer back to the earlier comments about divorce and adultery. He then proceeds to praise the state of eunuchs (emasculation) and those who choose to be eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom.

Where Matthew frames Jesus’ teaching about marriage and divorce with a more extreme model (beyond the simple non-marriage proposed by the disciples to a cessation of propagation and desire completely by becoming non-sexual beings for the sake of the kingdom), Luke frames the teaching about divorce and adultery with discourse about economic desire and justice and about the immutability of the commandments.⁷⁰ If we are to understand the gospels as the first commentaries on these pieces of the Jesus tradition, then they point us to understanding Jesus’ interpretations of the legal tradition as critiques of two motivations for divorce. On the first premise, if a man (the text explicitly addresses men) divorces and remarries through his failure of love or compassion (i.e. the premise of ‘marital’ breakdown), Jesus says this is adultery. On the second premise if one divorces and remarries for progeny (because the woman is deemed infertile for whatever reason), Jesus says this is adultery. On the third premise, if one divorces and remarries for economic reasons (i.e. treating marriage as a mechanism for improving one’s socio-economic status), Jesus says one is committing adultery, and the follow-up with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus we should then reasonably read as implying a serious failure of economic justice toward the abandoned wife. If we are to take seriously the Matthaean and Lukan frames, they understand Jesus teaching on divorce to be more than a mere statement of respect for marriage, but to be a lively critique of the dominant dynamics of the norms of patriarchal marriage—enforcement of male wishes, preoccupation with progeny, and socio-economic strategic alliances.

The Rejection of Marriage in Early Christianity

More profound still is the wider implication of the passage about eunuchs. What becomes eminently clear at several levels in the early layers of tradition (and also in several places in Paul) is an early and complete Christian rejection of marriage for an alternate vision of social community. From a narrative point of view the text models this in Jesus himself. Not only is he apparently unmarried (which would render him socially abnormal in his period), but all four gospels portray him as cultivating open, affectionate, and mutually dialogical relationships with women and men—in particular with individuals who are not infrequently themselves victims of forms of social opprobrium. The texts construct not only a model of open table fellowship which disrupts social boundaries and categories, but

70. Luke 16:13ff: “No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.’ The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So he said to them, ‘You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.

‘The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped. ‘Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.

‘There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores....”

of open relational community which the texts portray as disrupting and challenging assumptions about marriage (the disciples appear to leave their wives and families), sexual boundaries, gendered work, and all institutions that normalize perceptions of social status. To a considerable extent the Acts of the Apostles in its much later re-construction of the emergence of the early Christian communities portrays a continuation of this openness.

I understand this outright challenging and denormalization of the status of marriage in early Christianity as the embodiment of as profound a critique of the Greco-Roman manifestation of fallen humanity as the Cross itself. In discussing the critique of patriarchy in Ephesians I noted that the three pillars of Greco-Roman empire were the sanctity and inviolability of the marital household, the extension of power through an elaborate network of patronage and military force that both defined social layers and bridged them in controlled ways, and the slave economy. A community that rejects marriage, practices open table fellowship and worships a crucified man forms the exact inversion of all the foundational values of the Greco-Roman world.⁷¹ Ultimately, of course, as Christianity became simply another form of “religion” all these disappeared. The cross became a symbol; marriage adopted even more rigid and abusive patriarchal forms; and the open table of fellowship became a ritual for privileged initiates.

This points to the profound importance of Paul’s letters and the other letters of the New Testament. While they mark the beginning point of this decline into “religion” they also manifest and model the entire problem of speaking such a radical Word faithfully into changing contexts and cultures. So while we see Paul negotiating, retaining, and embodying in new language and expressive forms much of the profound shock of the Cross and open table fellowship,⁷² the texts also show him encountering great difficulties in maintaining the stance of blatant rejection of marriage. This is hardly surprising since it is the attack on marriage that most easily provokes public comment since it implies immediate disruption of existing familial norms and expectation. What emerges in one approach is a sort of articulation of the ideal of open community without marriage—preferentially celibacy, but also judging by some of the polemics there must have been in some circles an understanding that open community really did mean some form of open relationality including sexual intimacy.⁷³ Over against this ideal is a series of compromises with the realities and diversity of the expanding Christian community, and with the norms and values of Greco-Roman family structures. The other approach, to which I alluded in discussing Ephesians, is the adoption of normative expressive forms connected to household management such as the “house-table” and adapting and rewriting it to embody the values and relations understandings of the Christian community.

So while at one level I understand this entire evolution to be an abandonment of the radical Word as experienced in Jesus Christ, at another level, I understand the texts to point again precisely to the constant demand for

71. So for instance, other relatively early Christian works like the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, and the *Martyrdoms of Perpetua and Felicity*, demonstrate a sort of frenzy at both familial and public levels that adherents of Jesus Christ provoked. Again, this offers an inversion of Elijah’s frenzy with *Baalism*—the energy represents more than disapproval of bad behaviour by Roman authorities and *patribus familiarum*, it represents a profound apprehension that taken to together all these behaviours fatally undermine the foundations of the entire social, economic, and political order.

72. For instance the discussion of the Eucharist in Corinthians which is in part a forthright critique of the transformation of table fellowship into religious ritual.

73. Whatever might have been the genuine understanding of the earliest Jesus community regarding the latter form of open community it is easy to see why it comes under internal criticism because of its flagrant offensiveness to the most principled Greco-Roman citizens. In Paul it is not always easy to distinguish what we might want to label as “morality” from “pragmatics.” Note too in this regard various attempts to understand Paul’s use of the term “sister-wife” precisely in a passage where he commences by evoking his freedom in Jesus Christ.

reinterpretation and the necessity that such reinterpretation be shaped by the forces of context and contingency.⁷⁴ There is not one form of household order—each is an attempt in a particular setting and moment to articulate as faithfully as possible the critique of the order worshipped by the fallen world and chaining it to its fallen state, within the limitations and realities of that world. So we find throughout the letters far more articulation of values and virtues than we find articulations of correct structures and normalizing institutions.

So far I have pointed to three strands I understand to be part of the New Testament discourse about marriage: the critique of the assumptions of patriarchal marriage in Jesus' teaching about divorce; the extreme radical early Christian rejection of marriage; and the necessary accommodation of the radical with the reality of interpreting and living the gospel in diverse cultures. All these I understand as at some level (as in the Old Testament) the living out of the now and the not yet implicit in the fallenness of humans and creation.

The fourth strand takes us back to Ruth, the Song of Songs and Genesis 2. Here we find the language and imagery of marriage and human partnership as envisaged in the creation as metaphor for the relation between Christ and the Church. Much of the commentary on how this is used in Ephesians 5:31-32 is quite wrongheaded. Usually the argument is made that the relation between Christ and the Church is a metaphor for human marriage. In fact the writer explicitly says the opposite, quoting Genesis 2:24, and continuing by saying that this verse and the behaviour it describes is a mystery. The mystery is that one human would abandon their closest relations (father and mother) for the individual they recognize as their true partner, their *'ezer kenegdo*. And the passage goes on, this human mystery illuminates for us the inner life of God, because this is exactly what Christ does, leave the Divine parent to cleave to the true partner, the Church. Even more fundamentally, we might see the mystery to which this alludes as that of the Incarnation—Christ leaving the Godhead to become one with humanity, enfleshed and totally intimate with us.

So I understand this passage in Ephesians to point in two directions—the first as indicated, is to an understanding of the marriage of divine and human in the Incarnation. The second direction is to an ecclesiological reality. This is a different version again of the image of the Body that Paul's epistles often adopt in speaking about the Church. In those metaphors the Body is alternately an image of the necessity and interdependence of all the faithful, or an image of the coordination of the faithful through the mind and will of Christ the head. Each of those alternatives implies a profoundly different understanding of ecclesiology. This image of the mystery of human cleaving to the *'ezer kenegdo* offers still another ecclesiological metaphor—one in which the Body of the Church is as essential to Christ as Christ is to the Church, and in which Christ becomes one flesh in and with the Church. This extended passage in Ephesians speaks about Christ perfecting and nurturing the church for its work here so that it will continue to be his own perfect gift to himself.

The Apocalypse of John takes up the image of the Church as bride of Christ from the heavenly perspective, and integrates it with the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem descending to earth so that the divine presence will once again dwell with humans. Linked to this is the promise that God will make all things new. This marriage metaphor is not simply a recapitulation by Paul and John of older biblical images (although this is certainly a part of what they are doing); it has its origins in the diverse parables of Jesus in which the wedding feast is a central metaphor for some element of the in-breaking of the kingdom.

74. This is why Paul is so essential as part of the canon—not because he provides us with a new set of laws and propositions to follow (as so many interpreters in the tradition have insisted on reading him) but because he models this process of reinterpreting the gospel in each new context and situation, of exploring both the danger and necessities of cultural compromise while at the same time holding passionately to the freedom found in Christ Jesus.

One of the problems posed by John's Apocalypse is the reversion to a form of the wisdom (and prophetic) dualism of "whore" (Babylon) and "bride" (Jerusalem/the Church). So while there is a participation in patriarchal forms of language and imagining, there is also in the Apocalypse's description of Babylon the image of the totality of fallen and patriarchal forms of power, economic, religious, and sexual life—it is these things and our spiritual investment in their forms and institutions that we bewail as we look on to the destruction of Babylon. The world is in distress because it has invested in a lie about power, because it has invested in the lie and violence of religion, because it has invested in the lies about structures of social and familial order ("the voice of the bridegroom and the bride will be heard in you no more"), and because it has invested in the lies about economic order.

This totality of oppressive forces (which I have identified as the object of God's action and judgement in the Exodus and in the Cross) so cogently articulated in John's vision of the fallen Babylon, is also what I understand Paul to refer to when he speaks about the Law in reference to the freedom given us in Christ. The term "Law" is not a simplistic reference to Jewish Law (Paul is much more complex than that), but a reference to any system, structure or institution in which we invest ourselves imagining that it will be a source of grace and salvation. It is for this reason that Paul takes his multiple and almost contradictory perspectives on the institution of marriage. When we make Paul's account of salvation or specific aspects of human moral behaviour a shibboleth, it too becomes another form of Law. Paul too can lead us to live in Babylon.

Finally, at the most broad level, it seems to me that beginning with the account in Acts 15, the general direction of the New Testament is to confine comment on human sexuality to the repeated warning against "fornication."⁷⁵ It seems to me this choice of term is deliberate, not merely because it was part of a conventional moral language within Judaism about the minimum terms defining righteousness for those outside Judaism, but because it provides great scope for contextual application and interpretation. While there would be good reasons to argue that "fornication" technically refers only to the breach of the marital relationship, and not to any other specific sexual behaviour, it is one of those blanket terms that can be filled with meaning depending on where it is spoken. Again, this is a crucial process for the faithful witness to the Word.⁷⁶

This leads to one additional question. If we are to take seriously that being "in Christ" makes possible the renewal of our lives and our relationships, that being in Christ indeed makes us a new creation, does this mean that we are genuinely restored to the hope and possibility of our state in Genesis 2—that being in Christ genuinely undoes the Fall? This clearly matters in terms of how we understand marriage or any other human relationship in which we discover our *'ezer kenegdo*. While I have here and elsewhere evoked the dynamic tension in the canon of the now and the not yet, the question can be pressed another way. If being "in Christ" cannot truly transform us and our relationships then what is the point of being "in Christ" or what was the point of Christ's salvific work? If the salvific work of Christ is merely a spiritual ephemeron, or a way of speaking, or a clever idea, and bears no relationship to an actual change in the material conditions of human life, then we would be better off with the first Exodus.⁷⁷

75. Richard Hooker at one point in his discussion of Acts 15 indicates that he understands "fornication" to refer only to adultery—that is, the direct interfering with the marital relationship.

76. This is why, it seems to me, the "sexual anthropologies" of the *Recognitions of Clement*, though much later, are so non-anxious. These and parallel examples almost always conclude with a comments to the effect that "We Christians do not behave in these ways, but in this way ..[followed by a list of values]." Fornication really does look different in different societies, and Christians need to be aware of those societal distinctions as well of the values by which they live.

77. Jesus in the garden, and Paul, both speak of the struggle between the Spirit and the Flesh—but the human being is not bifurcated. Any account that sees our bodies as saved and our minds as corrupt, or conversely, our minds and spirits as saved and our bodies as corrupt, seems to me inadequate. That said, most of us likely share some element of Paul's experience: "Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'"

7. Same-Sex Relationships, Human Dignity and Rights, and Scripture

I have laid out this much larger framework for how I understand the Bible both in its broad preoccupations and inwardly indicated modes of interpretation, and then in relation to what I consider critical related themes. I now turn to the matter of same-sex relationships.

First of all, I think that any mode of historicism that pretends to articulate how ancient Near Eastern men and women felt or thought about sexuality or specific sexual acts (e.g. the notion one sometimes encounters that Hebrew men had an intense fear of being penetrated) is sheer silliness. Particularly with regard to prohibitive regulations there may be a variety of reasons or motivations. Prohibitions may be articulations of a larger system of meaning and understanding. They may represent cultivated distastes or taboos of religious systems. They may represent the fact that everyone enjoys doing it but that someone thinks it to be bad or dangerous for some reason. Secondly, virtually all the relevant portions of scripture are subject to considerable ambiguity when we try to understand to what exactly they refer.

With regard to the scriptural materials, I simply see no rational grounds for including Genesis 19 or Judges 19 as relevant to the specific question of same-sex relationships and partnerships. Both texts focus on expressed desire by groups of males to rape other males. I have already indicated why in Judges 19, I understand this to be an enactment of a group desire to punish or enforce a particular set of social conditions on other males. In both cases the event points to breaches in fundamental hospitality to strangers, forms of xenophobia, with excessive violence, and in both cases the texts, by permitting women to be the substitutionary objects to release males from the threat of sexual violence, seem to me to be pursuing what I have already articulated as a prolonged inner-biblical critique of patriarchy in all its manifestations. These stories should and do appal us, not because they are about male-male sex but because they are about male violence against weaker males and against women. Male sexual violence against males is thus exposed as a part of patriarchy, and as one of the forces used to maintain its power and order within society.

Other passages (2 Kings etc), would suggest that male cultic prostitution is an issue.⁷⁸ Here too, it seems to me we are not in any way talking about the specific question of same-sex relationships and partnerships. As I have already indicated, such prohibitions and disapprovals connect to the much larger critique of natural religion and patriarchal religion, and to the confusion of sexuality with religion in understandings of economic fertility and in understandings of the rights of powerful men to dominate women, children, and other weaker men.

Likewise, I am not convinced that Romans 1 is germane to this discussion, not simply because once again it is not entirely clear what particular behaviours are being described, and whether these bear any relationship to what we are discussing as same sex-relationships and partnerships.⁷⁹ Insofar as the passage articulates a view that such

78. I have already noted the scholarly debate about whether any forms of cultic prostitution existed in the ancient Near East. Whatever may be the historical reality, the presence of the matter in the texts would suggest that it needs to be considered as a class of “same-sex” activity under scrutiny.

79. I quote here Archbishop Rowan Williams’ treatment of this passage in his recent Larkin-Stuart Lecture. “My second example is even more contentious in the present climate; and once again I must stress that the point I am making is not that the reading I propose settles a controversy or changes a substantive interpretation but that many current ways of reading miss the actual direction of the passage and so undermine a proper theological approach to Scripture. Paul in the first chapter of Romans famously uses same-sex relationships as an illustration of human depravity – along with other “unnatural” behaviours such as scandal, disobedience to parents and lack of pity. It is, for the majority of modern readers the most important single text in Scripture on the subject of homosexuality, and has understandably been the focus of an enormous amount of exegetical attention.

behaviours stand under divine judgement, the text in its most typical rendering is also absolutely explicit: this judgement or penalty has already been incurred and is over. But a key verb in the text *katergazomenoi* has the sense of overpowering and controlling in its classical sense, and likewise the term *antimisthian* carries the weight not simply of requital, but derives from a verb that means “giving hatred in return.” Such a reading, “Males overpowering males indecently received the deserved hatred in return, receiving back in their own persons their errors,” points us once again to the much more complex realm of patriarchal assumptions about the rights of powerful men to control and sexually use others. In this reading, the judgement is still complete, but it reflects more the hatred among men, and the responsive resentment and violence that such use of sexual power generates in a patriarchal society. This would hold true for the terms in 1 Corinthians 6, although here it seems to me that Paul is adopting a language that shares the assumptions and values of Corinthian culture about maleness—the text differentiates between weak and effeminate men and men who are penetrators of others.

Whatever we may want to understand about Romans and Corinthians, it seems to me that the single fundamental passage of relevance is the material in Leviticus 18. While Paul may be adopting the Greco-Roman cultural values as part of his strategy for proclaiming the gospel (which does not mean that we are obliged to adopt the same language, values or distinctions when we seek to proclaim the Word faithfully in our own cultural setting), he is also at some level engaged with the canonical tradition he inherits. But again, as I think my earlier discussion makes clear, because Paul understands something in the scriptures in a specific way in his own period does not mean that there is no other way to understand the material, or even that Paul is correct. What Paul does is give faithful testimony to Jesus Christ to first-century Corinth, or Rome, or Galatia or Thessalonika.

We should note first that some of the material from Leviticus 18 is already reinterpreted in Leviticus 19-20, where it reappears as part of a larger context often called the Holiness Code. Leviticus 19 and 20 in themselves suggest different layers—the injunctions in chapter 19, while diverse, focus primarily on economic and social equity and justice. The injunctions in chapter 20 begin by focusing on particular cultic and religious practices, then shift to a series of sexual practices. Both chapter 20 and chapter 18 have concluding “sermonettes” that identify the proscribed behaviours with the Canaanite nations that God will be driving out of their lands. By linking this material to the Canaanite cities and culture, I understand the text itself to be signaling that this is part of the larger biblical discourse about the linkage between patriarchy and “religion.” The sexual behaviours involved are all manifestations of the socio-economic order of patriarchy and the cultic and religious practices and forms that sustain that order. This is why they are reprehensible to God. The penalties for the most part are death and cutting-off from the community.

“What is Paul’s argument? And, once again, what is the movement that the text seeks to facilitate? The answer is in the opening of chapter 2: we have been listing examples of the barefaced perversity of those who cannot see the requirements of the natural order in front of their noses; well, it is precisely the same perversity that affects those who have received the revelation of God and persist in self-seeking and self-deceit. The change envisaged is from confidence in having received divine revelation to an awareness of universal sinfulness and need. Once again, there is a paradox in reading Romans 1 as a foundation for identifying in others a level of sin that is not found in the chosen community.

“Now this gives little comfort to either party in the current culture wars in the Church. It is not helpful for a “liberal” or revisionist case, since the whole point of Paul’s rhetorical gambit is that everyone in his imagined readership agrees in thinking the same-sex relations of the culture around them to be as obviously immoral as idol-worship or disobedience to parents. It is not very helpful to the conservative either, though, because Paul insists on shifting the focus away from the objects of moral disapprobation in chapter 1 to the reading/hearing subject who has been up to this point happily identifying with Paul’s castigation of someone else. The complex and interesting argument of chapter 1 about certain forms of sin beginning by the “exchange” of true for false perception and natural for unnatural desire stands, but now has to be applied not to the pagan world alone but to the “insiders” of the chosen community. Paul is making a primary point not about homosexuality but about the delusions of the supposedly law-abiding.”

What chapters 19 and 20 thus juxtapose are the preoccupations of the culture of Exodus values (justice, generosity and mercy at all levels of communal interaction), and the preoccupations of Canaanite natural religion.⁸⁰

Based on the form of the injunctions in Leviticus 18:6-18, I do not understand these as laws relating to incest. They do relate to kinship relations, but the form of the law in most cases is addressed to a male and describes the forbidden individual as possession of another male (e.g. “You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s wife; it is the nakedness of your father.”) They are thus, in my view, laws of limit within a patriarchal structure (the nakedness usually belongs to another male). There is another more particular reason for my reading in this way. There is one category of relationship completely omitted from proscription, namely that of a man and his daughter. The Hebrew of verse 17, which might be seen to cover this category, addresses the more generalized issues of sexual relations with a woman and her offspring and grand-children—simply because “they are blood relations among themselves.” The Greek version of the text “reads in” the possessive adjective to make the text cover the missing category—“they are your blood relations.” This omission is not accidental—it is precisely the assumption of patriarchy that female offspring are possessions of the father and he cannot come into conflict with himself over what he already possesses. Thus I understand the initial part of Leviticus 18 as regulating potential struggle and conflict between men in a patriarchal order over the sexual access to and possession of women and children. This is different in my view from the framework of morality usually attributed by the careless glossing of this passage as incest prohibitions.

It is in this light then, that I begin to interpret the final series of injunctions which break the pattern of kinship prohibitions. I think there are two perspectives on this material. First, in the light of the framing of the material with the denunciation of Canaanite religious practices, these may all be instances of cultically related behaviours. Their proscription is thus in relation to their linkage to foreign religious usage. But in this case, the prohibition of same-sex coitus cannot be understood in any way to be related to the matter of same-sex relationships in our present context, since we are not talking about particular forms of sexually related cultic practice.

Alternatively, their proscription may be a continuation of the preoccupation with male power in a patriarchal order. Certainly all of these prohibitions can be reasonably construed in this light (compelling sex during the menstrual period, taking a kinsman’s wife, the absolute power over children including the right to sacrifice them, overpowering another male sexually, taking an animal sexually, or forcing a woman to have sex with an animal).⁸¹ Where there is no consistent link between the prohibitions is if we take them (as some do) as related to the waste of semen without producing progeny (both of the first two categories do not preclude progeny, and the sacrificing of children is a bit of a stretch of the principle). Nor is this group of texts preoccupied with the necessity of male-female complementarity as a ritual category that manifests “divine intention” (the prohibition of child sacrifice has no relationship to this whatsoever, and only the prohibitions of same-sex coitus and coitus with animals breach such a notion).

80. It is this juxtaposition, it seems to me, that leads very early on to an abandonment of the death penalty in Judaism not only for sexual offences but for most offences. The rabbinic tradition witnesses with some consistency that any court that executed anyone within a hundred year period must be labelled a “killer court.” See Rabbi Steven Greenberg’s *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. 2004) on how the rabbis deal with the death penalty for same-sex sexual behaviour.

81. It seems to me that the prohibition on women having sex with animals must be either in reference to some form of cultic sexual practice or in reference to their being forced to do so by men who have power over them. While I do not pretend to be an expert on women’s sexual practice, it seems to me there is considerably more cross cultural evidence of men having sex with animals than of women doing so. Surely God was not totally preoccupied in the desert of Sinai with the anticipated future existence of Catherine the Great?

Obviously, we could simply assume this is a random grab bag of prohibitions with no real formal connection or unity. I have indicated above why I consider the context of material significant for its interpretation. In this light, it seems to me we have to see the prohibition of same-sex coitus either as a practice prohibited because of its connection to Canaanite cults, or because of its place in the larger critique and limitation of male power in the patriarchal context. But neither of these explicitly bears relationship to the contemporary discussion of same-sex partnerships and unions.⁸²

I note one further thing. Leviticus uses technical terminology to classify actions. The particular action described in Leviticus 18:22 is classified as a *to'ebah*. This term, typically translated as “abomination” appears almost universally in the texts as a classificatory term. “Abomination” is a meaningless term, one of a class of verbal containers for whatever feelings and meanings we choose to pour into it. If we seek to find a foundational meaning for the term, however, we must turn to Genesis 46, which is the single instance where the word appears in a purely narrative context. There we are told that the family of Jacob were permitted to settle in the land of Goshen, “because all shepherds are *to'ebot* to the Egyptians.” What this makes clear is that the primary and foundational meaning of *to'ebah* (because here it is applied to the Israelites as an object in the view of the Egyptians) is “a strong distaste/disgust distinctive to a particular cultural or national group.” For this reason, beyond the much broader considerations of the place and intent of this prohibition, I think there is a plausible argument to be made that the prohibition of same-sex coitus is a matter that is *to'ebah* particularly to Israel, not a matter of general “morality,” and that in the same way that the early Church set aside other prohibitions it deemed particular to the identity of Israel, the Church is at liberty to set this aside.⁸³

Human Dignity, Human Rights and Scripture

Whatever the scriptural view of gay and lesbian relations, there remains the much broader question of their fundamental dignity and rights as human beings. It has become a convention in some theological circles to argue that the Bible nowhere talks about human rights, and that therefore, to advance claims that any group or category of people have “rights,” is contrary to scriptural modes of thought.⁸⁴ Clearly, all that has gone before points in a very different direction. There are several foundational issues.

First, our dignity as human beings flows from our creation in the image of God (Genesis 1). Most fundamentally, therefore, human dignity is the same dignity as God’s dignity. When another human comes before us we owe them the same obligation we would owe God.⁸⁵ And this is reinforced in Genesis 2—any other human being is

82. The prohibition in Leviticus 18:22, given the context of the entire passage could be more reasonably seen as referring to sexual misconduct of males in authority with their students or protégés.

83. This terminological usage is, I think, one root of the argument made by the scholar Jacob Milgrom that the prohibition on same-sex coitus applies only to Israelites, and only to Israelites living in the land of Israel.

84. This sort of argument has a long history in the Church—it has always been foundational to its policies of exclusion, power and control. It is important to remember that the language of “human rights” so excoriated as part of “modernity” was invented in the seventeenth and eighteenth century by Christian philosophers who were increasingly appalled by the way that the Church connived with the state at the imprisonment, torture, and sometimes execution of individuals it disagreed with. It is the philosophers’ response precisely to a church which has become nothing more than “religion”, invested in its power and authority.

85. Thus the Summary of the Law articulated already by the rabbis in Jesus’ time and echoed by him, and adopted into Anglican liturgical formularies in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

potentially our *‘ezer kenegdo*, and therefore the one who confronts us face to face, to hold us accountable, and in whom we find relationship and wholeness.⁸⁶ The other human thus has a claim, a “right” over against us, that is fundamental to God’s purpose in creating him or her. The other person was created because it was not good that I should be alone—their human rights lie in the fact that they are God’s gift to me, not for abuse and domination, but for equality, collaboration, integrity and partnership.

This dignity is reasserted very clearly in Psalm 8, where God’s glory over creation is set in juxtaposition with human insignificance. But this proclamation of human insignificance (“What is the weak human [*‘enosb*] that you remember them; and the human one [*ben-’adam*] that you care about them?”) is immediately turned upside down by the assertion “You have made them little less than God; and with glory/dignity and honour you crown them.” This word *kabod*, meaning dignity or honour is more often applied to God (e.g. Psalm 29). The Psalter frames Psalm 8 with two psalms that articulate the rights of humans to freedom and safety from persecution and oppression. It is precisely the human propensity to single out others for persecution, to deny their fundamental rights as human beings, that causes Psalm 7 to describe God as “a just/righteous judge, who is denouncing [such mistreatment of others] with indignation every day.” Psalms 9 and 10 (in some traditions considered a single psalm) hold together the divine judgement on nations that ignore the rights of human beings and oppress them alongside the divine attention and openness to those individuals who are being subjected to exclusion, oppression and persecution—precisely, as the pair of psalms conclude, “so that those [oppressors] will never again cause terror and dread for a weak human (*‘enosb* as in Psalm 8:4).

The Psalms throughout insist on this human dignity, not simply as a matter of propositional assertion, but in their very form. An overwhelming proportion of the psalms are complaint psalms, in which the speakers, who are suffering oppression, often at the hands of others, cry out to God for deliverance and safety, insisting and demanding that God protect and reassert on his/her behalf their fundamental human dignity and rights for justice and security.⁸⁷ This tradition is more widespread throughout the Old Testament than simply the psalms—human beings have a right to talk back to God, to insist that God act for them. Human beings have a right to assert their innocence in the face of all the religious forces that seek to create a social order in which no one can be innocent (Job generally, but articulated explicitly by God in Job 42 in condemning the views expressed by his religious friends). If humans have these rights before God, then at the very minimum they must have these rights before other humans.

The texts consistently set before us these obligations:

- to treat others, as the image of God, as if they were God before us;
- to treat others, as our *‘ezer kenegdo*, as the face confronting us as gift for love, companionship and respect;
- to set in primary place of importance the interests of the weak, the dispossessed, and the stranger in fulfilling the obligations of the law of justice;
- to choose to limit ourselves in the face of the weakness or disposability of others;
- to act for and seek to create societies and conditions of justice and equity.

These are fundamental elements of the traditions of the Torah and the Prophets.

86. This I understand to be one of the crucial foundations of the late twentieth century philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’ exploration of the significance of the human “face” as a foundational category of being and for our understanding of fullness of being.

87. See also Walter Brueggemann’s handling of this theme in his lecture “The Fearful Thirst for Dialogue.”

Finally, our fundamental human dignity and rights are articulated in the parable of the last judgement (Matthew 25). The judgement of both nations and individuals hangs on their treatment of the poor, the weak, the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the imprisoned (the text nowhere says only those unjustly imprisoned)—all these whom the eternal Judge describes as “the least of these my brothers and sisters.” It has become fashionable in some commentaries (a fashion which reasserts itself every few centuries when the church wants to find ways to exclude others from justice), to argue that by using the term “my brothers and sisters” that the text means only our attention to those who are members of the Christian community. We need to remember who is the speaker in this text. As the parable opens we are told that it is the Human One (the *huios tou anthropou*, literal Greek for the Aramaic bar ‘*enosb*)⁸⁸ who is coming in glory, to sit on the throne of glory and to judge the nations. This One, replete with all the rights and dignity the Human One has, is the one who judges nations and people; it is the Human One who asks us how we have treated his brothers and sisters—all the other Human Ones.

We know that in the Gospels, this phrase is one of the ways Jesus refers to himself. Ultimately, the Divine One who judges us at the eschaton for our respect of the human dignity and human rights of others, is none other than Jesus, the Human One, with whom we are bound up in a single humanity as the image and beloved of God. And like Jesus, we find our full humanity in two ways: by setting aside ourselves and our claims to attain the healing, wholeness and reconciliation of the world; and by insisting, at every moment of judgement public and private, on the dignity and rights of every One who is a brother or sister of that Human One. Only when we do that can we participate in undoing our share in the cross of Jesus, and only then do we begin to be drawn into the divine life of freedom and responsibility.

88. Traditionally translated as “Son of Man,” “Human One” seems to me more accurate, both in the light of the various scholarly arguments about the meaning of the term and its Aramaic derivation, which is also linked to the Hebrew term we find in Psalm 8. The term *ben* in both languages does not simply mean son, but can also mean of the “clan” or “family” or “class” of some type, and here clearly points to the notion “of the class identified as human.”