

many parts of my growth and learning, my colleague M. Douglas Meeks has stimulated these reflections.

This book is offered in thanksgiving for a growing number of my sisters who at long last are finding acceptance in ordained ministry. For me, of course, that distinguished group of colleagues is headed by my wife, Mary, who pastors in prophetic ways. It includes a growing number of women who have been my student colleagues at Eden Seminary.

I am growingly aware that this book is different because of the emerging feminine consciousness as it impacts our best theological thinking. That impacting is concerned not with abrasive crusading but with a different nuancing of all our perceptions. I do not think that women ministers and theologians are the first to have discerned the realities of grief and amazement in our lives, but they have helped us see them as important dimensions of prophetic reality. In many ways these sisters have permitted me to see what I otherwise might have missed. For that I am grateful—and amazed.

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# 1

## THE ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY OF MOSES

A STUDY of the prophets of Israel must try to take into account both the evidence of the Old Testament and the contemporary situation of the church. What we understand about the Old Testament must be somehow connected with the realities of the church today. So I shall begin with a statement of how I see our present situation and the task facing us in ministry. I will not elaborate but only provide a clue to the perspective from which I am presenting the subject.

The contemporary American church is so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism that it has little power to believe or to act. This enculturation is in some way true across the spectrum of church life, both liberal and conservative. It may not be a new situation, but it is one that seems especially urgent and pressing at the present time. That enculturation is true not only of the institution of the church but also of us as persons. Our consciousness has been claimed by false fields of perception and idolatrous systems of language and rhetoric.

The internal cause of such enculturation is our loss of identity through the abandonment of the faith tradition. Our consumer culture is organized against history. There is a depreciation of memory and a ridicule of hope, which means everything must be held in the now, either an urgent now or an eternal now. Either way, a community rooted in energizing memories and summoned by radical hopes is a curiosity and a threat in such a culture.

When we suffer from amnesia every form of serious authority for faith is in question, and we live unauthorized lives of faith and practice unauthorized ministries.

The church will not have power to act or believe until it recovers its tradition of faith and permits that tradition to be the primal way out of enculturation. This is not a cry for traditionalism but rather a judgment that the church has no business more pressing than the reappropriation of its memory in its full power and authenticity. And that is true among liberals who are too chic to remember and conservatives who have overlaid the faith memory with all kinds of hedges that smack of scientism and Enlightenment.

It is the task of prophetic ministry to bring the claims of the tradition and the situation of enculturation into an effective interface. That is, the prophet is called to be a child of the tradition, one who has taken it seriously in the shaping of his or her own field of perception and system of language, who is so at home in that memory that the points of contact and incongruity with the situation of the church in culture can be discerned and articulated with proper urgency.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I will want to urge that there are precise models in Scripture for discerning prophetic ministry in this way.

A study of the prophets of Israel must also try to take into account both the best discernment of contemporary scholarship and what the tradition itself seems to tell us. The tradition and contemporary scholarship are likely to be in some kind of tension, and we must try to be attentive to that. The weariness and serenity of the churches just now make it a good time to study the prophets and get rid of tired misconceptions. The dominant conservative misconception, evident in manifold bumper stickers, is that the prophet is a future-teller, a predictor of things to come (mostly ominous), usually with specific reference to Jesus. While one would not want to deny totally those facets of the practice of prophecy, there tends to be a kind of reductionism that is mechanical and therefore untenable. While the prophets are in a way future-tellers, they are concerned with the future as it impinges upon the present. Conversely, liberals who abdicated and

turned all futuring over to conservatives have settled for a focus on the present. Thus prophecy is alternatively reduced to righteous indignation, and in circles where I move, prophecy is mostly understood as social action. Indeed, such a liberal understanding of prophecy is an attractive and face-saving device for any excessive abrasiveness in the service of almost any cause. Perhaps our best effort would be to let the futuring of such conservatives and the present criticism of the liberals correct each other. But even that is less than might be claimed. I believe that neither such convention adequately understands what is really at issue in the Israelite understanding of prophecy.

The hypothesis I will explore here is this: *The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.*<sup>2</sup> Thus I suggest that prophetic ministry has to do not primarily with addressing specific public crises but with addressing, in season and out of season, the dominant crisis that is enduring and resilient, of having our alternative vocation co-opted and domesticated. It may be, of course, that this enduring crisis manifests itself in any given time around concrete issues, but it concerns the enduring crisis that runs from concrete issue to concrete issue. That point is particularly important to ad hoc liberals who run from issue to issue without discerning the enduring domestication of vision in all of them.

The alternative consciousness to be nurtured, on the one hand, serves to *criticize* in dismantling the dominant consciousness. To that extent, it attempts to do what the liberal tendency has done, engage in a rejection and delegitimizing of the present ordering of things. On the other hand, that alternative consciousness to be nurtured serves to *energize* persons and communities by its promise of another time and situation toward which the community of faith may move. To that extent it attempts to do what the conservative tendency has done, to live in fervent anticipation of the newness that God has promised and will surely give.

In thinking this way, the key word is *alternative*, and every prophetic minister and prophetic community must engage in a struggle with that notion. Thus, alternative to what? In what

ways alternative? How radically alternative? Finally, is there a thinkable alternative that will avoid domestication? And, quite concretely, how does one present and act out alternatives in a community of faith which on the whole does not understand that there are any alternatives, or is not prepared to embrace such if they come along? Thus it is a practice of ministry for which there is little readiness, indeed, not even among its would-be practitioners. So, my programmatic urging is that every act of a minister who would be prophetic is part of a way of evoking, forming, and reforming an alternative community. And this applies to every facet and every practice of ministry. It is a measure of our enculturation that the various acts of ministry (for example, counseling, administration, even liturgy) have taken on lives and functions of their own rather than being seen as elements of the one prophetic ministry of formation and reformation of alternative community.

The functional qualifiers, *critical* and *energizing*, are important. I suggest that the dominant culture, now and in every time, is grossly uncritical, cannot tolerate serious and fundamental criticism, and will go to great lengths to stop it. Conversely, the dominant culture is a wearied culture, nearly unable to be seriously energized to new promises from God. We, know, of course, that none of us relishes criticism, but we may also recognize that none of us much relishes energizing either, for that would demand something of us. The task of prophetic ministry is to hold together criticism and energizing, for I should urge that either by itself is not faithful to our best tradition. Our faith tradition understands that it is precisely the dialectic of criticizing and energizing which can let us be seriously faithful to God. And we may even suggest that to choose between criticizing and energizing is the temptation, respectively, of liberalism and conservatism. Liberals are good at criticism but often have no word of promise to speak; conservatives tend to future well and invite to alternative visions, but a germane criticism by the prophet is often not forthcoming. For those of us personally charged with this ministry, we may observe that to be called where this dialectic is maintained is an awesome call. And each of us is likely to fall to one side or the other.

As a beginning point in these considerations, I propose that our understanding of prophecy comes out of the covenantal tradition of Moses. I do not minimize the important scholarly contributions concerning non-Israelite antecedents to prophecy in Israel. These include (a) studies in the Canaanite phenomenon of ecstasy, surely echoed in 1 Samuel 10 and 19; and, more recently, (b) the evidence from Mari concerning institutional offices of prophecy, both in the cult and in the court.<sup>3</sup> Both these kinds of evidence illuminate practices and conventions to which Israel undoubtedly appealed in its much borrowing. But the tradition itself is not ambiguous when it comes to the dominating figure of Moses who provides our primary understandings. That is to say, the shaping of Israel took place from inside its own experience and confession of faith and not through external appropriation from somewhere else. That urging is fundamental for this discussion, for I am urging in parallel fashion that if the church is to be faithful it must be formed and ordered from the inside of its experience and confession and not by borrowing from sources external to its own life. This judgment, I am aware, is against the current tendency of scholarship. Thus, for example, Ronald Clements in his more recent *Prophecy and Tradition*<sup>4</sup> has drawn back somewhat from his earlier position in *Covenant and Prophecy*.<sup>5</sup> There is currently the reassertion of a kind of neo-Wellhausenian perspective, and that may be an important corrective to the synthesis of Gerhard von Rad. Nonetheless, I would urge that we are on sound ground if we take as our beginning point Moses as the paradigmatic prophet who sought to evoke in Israel an alternative consciousness.

The ministry of Moses, as George Mendenhall and Norman Gottwald have most recently urged, represents a radical break with the social reality of Pharaoh's Egypt.<sup>6</sup> The newness and radical innovativeness of Moses and Israel in this period can hardly be overstated. Most of us are probably so used to these narratives that we have become insensitive to the radical and revolutionary social reality that emerged because of Moses. It is clear that the emergence of Israel by the hand of Moses cannot be extrapolated from any earlier reality. Obviously nothing like the Kenite hypothesis or the monotheism of the eighteenth dynasty in Egypt will help us at all. While there are some hints that the God

of Israel is known to be the God of the fathers (cf. Exod. 15:2), that evidence is at best obscure. In any case, the overriding experience of Exodus is decisive and not some memory now only hinted at in the tradition. However those antecedents are finally understood, *the appearance of a new social reality* is unprecedented. Israel in the thirteenth century is indeed ex nihilo. And that new social reality drives us to the category of revelation.<sup>7</sup> Israel can only be understood in terms of the new call of God and his assertion of an alternative social reality. Prophecy is born precisely in that moment when the emergence of social political reality is so radical and inexplicable that it has *nothing less than a theological cause*. Theological cause without social political reality is only of interest to professional religionists, and social political reality without theological cause need not concern us here. But it is being driven by the one to the other that requires us to speak of and wonder about the call to the prophetic.<sup>8</sup>

(1) The radical break of Moses and Israel from imperial reality is a two-dimensioned break from both the religion of static triumphalism and the politics of oppression and exploitation. Moses dismantled the religion of static triumphalism by exposing the gods and showing that in fact they had no power and were not gods. Thus, the mythical legitimacy of Pharaoh's social world is destroyed, for it is shown that such a regime appeals to sanctions that in fact do not exist. The mythic claims of the empire are ended by the disclosure of *the alternative religion of the freedom of God*.<sup>9</sup> In place of the gods of Egypt, creatures of the imperial consciousness, Moses discloses Yahweh the sovereign one who acts in his lordly freedom, is extrapolated from no social reality, and is captive to no social perception but acts from his own person toward his own purposes.

At the same time, Moses dismantles the politics of oppression and exploitation by countering it with a *politics of justice and compassion*. The reality emerging out of the Exodus is not just a new religion or a new religious idea or a vision of freedom but the emergence of a new social community in history, a community that has historical body, that had to devise laws, patterns of governance and order, norms of right and wrong, and sanctions

of accountability. The participants in the Exodus found themselves, undoubtedly surprisingly to them, involved in the intentional formation of a *new social community* to match the vision of *God's freedom*. That new social reality, which is utterly discontinuous with Egypt, lasted in its alternative way for 250 years.

We will not understand the meaning of prophetic imagination unless we see the connection between the *religion of static triumphalism* and the *politics of oppression and exploitation*. Karl Marx had discerned the connection when he observed that the criticism of religion is the ultimate criticism and must lead to the criticism of law, economics, and politics.<sup>10</sup> The gods of Egypt are the immovable lords of order. They call for, sanction, and legitimate a society of order, which is precisely what Egypt had. In Egypt, as Frankfort has shown, there were no revolutions, no breaks for freedom. There were only the necessary political and economic arrangements to provide order, "naturally," the order of Pharaoh. Thus the religion of the static gods is not and never could be disinterested, but inevitably it served the interests of the people in charge, presiding over the order and benefiting from the order. And the functioning of that society testified to the rightness of the religion because kings did prosper and bricks did get made.

It is the marvel of prophetic faith that both imperial religion and imperial politics could be broken. Religiously, the gods were declared no-gods. Politically, the oppressiveness of the brickyard was shown to be ineffective and not necessary to human community. Moses introduced not just the new free God and not just a message of social liberation. Rather, his work came precisely at the engagement of the *religion of God's freedom* with the *politics of human justice*. Derivative finally from Marx, we can learn from these traditions that finally we will not have a politics of justice and compassion unless we have a religion of God's freedom. We are indeed made in the image of some God. And perhaps we have no more important theological investigation than to discern in whose image we have been made. Our sociology is predictably derived from, legitimated by, and reflec-

tive of our theology. And if we gather around a static god of order who only guards the interests of the "haves," oppression cannot be far behind. Conversely, if a God is disclosed who is free to come and go, free from and even against the regime, free to hear and even answer slave cries, free from all proper godness as defined by the empire, then it will bear decisively upon sociology because the freedom of God will surface in the brickyards and manifest itself as justice and compassion.

My impression is that we have split those two items much too easily but not without reason. The liberal tendency has been to care about the politics of justice and compassion but to be largely uninterested in the freedom of God. Indeed, it has been hard for liberals to imagine that theology mattered, for all of that seemed irrelevant. And it was thought that the question of God could be safely left to others who still worried about such matters. As a result, social radicalism has been like a cut flower without nourishment, without any sanctions deeper than human courage and good intentions. Conversely, it has been the tendency in other quarters to care intensely about God, but uncritically, so that the God of well-being and good order is not understood to be precisely the source of social oppression. Indeed, a case can be made that unprophetic conservatives did not take God seriously enough to see that our discernment of God has remarkable sociological implications. And between liberals who imagine God to be irrelevant to sociology and conservatives who unwittingly use a notion of God for social reasons because they do not see how the two belong together, there is little to choose. Here it is enough to insist that Moses, paradigm for prophet, carried the alternative in both directions: a religion of God's freedom as alternative to the static imperial religion of order and triumph and a politics of justice and compassion as alternative to the imperial politics of oppression. The point that prophetic imagination must ponder is that there is no freedom of God without the politics of justice and compassion, and there is no politics of justice and compassion without a religion of the freedom of God.

The program of Moses is not the freeing of a little band of slaves as an escape from the empire, though that is important enough,

especially if you happen to be in that little band. Rather, his work is nothing less than an assault on the consciousness of the empire, aimed at nothing less than the dismantling of the empire both in its social practices and in its mythic pretensions. Israel emerged not by Moses' hand—although not without Moses' hand—as a genuine alternative community. The prophetic tradition knows that it bears a genuine alternative to a theology of God's enslavement and a sociology of human enslavement. That genuine alternative, entrusted to us who bear that calling, is rooted not in social theory or in righteous indignation or in altruism but in the genuine alternative that Yahweh is. Yahweh makes possible and requires an alternative theology and an alternative sociology. Prophecy begins in discerning how genuinely alternative he is.

(2) The alternative consciousness wrought through Moses is characterized by criticizing and energizing. I will pursue this in more detail later, but these comments are in order now. The narrative of the Exodus is designed to show the radical criticism and radical dismantling of the Egyptian empire. At the beginning (Exod. 5:7-10) the Egyptians are in full flower and full power. They "wheel and deal" and are subject to none:

Let heavier work be laid upon the men that they may labor at it and pay no regard to lying words. So the taskmasters and the foremen of the people went out and said to the people, "Thus says Pharaoh. . . ."

Notice how the language is shaped to evoke anger and bring to expression the deep resentment at this whole system. But the story moves. At the end, these same masters, taskmasters, and foremen are vanquished, humiliated, and banished from history:

The Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. (14:13)

Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore. (14:30)

From beginning to end the narrative shows, with no rush to conclude, how the religious claims of Egyptian gods are nullified by this Lord of freedom. The narrative shows, with delighted lingering, how the politics of oppression is overcome by the practice of

justice and compassion. And between the beginning and the end the moment of dismantling is the plague cycle, a narrative that cannot be told too often, for it testifies to what cannot be explained, surely not by the reason of the empire. It happens in this way: In the first two plagues, concerning the turn of the Nile and the frogs, the powerful work of Moses and Aaron is matched by Egyptian *techne*. Two plagues into the scene nothing is changed and the power of Egypt is not challenged. The empire knows how to play "anything you can do, I can do better." But then comes the third plague:

Aaron stretched out his hand with his rod, and struck the dust of the earth, and there came gnats on man and beast; all the dust of the earth became gnats throughout all the land of Egypt. The magicians tried by their secret arts to bring forth gnats, but they could not! (Exod. 8:17-18)

The Egyptian empire could not! The gods of Egypt could not! The scientists of the regime could not! The imperial religion was dead! The politics of oppression had failed! That is the ultimate criticism, that the assured and alleged power of the dominant culture is now shown to be fraudulent. Criticism is not carping and denouncing. It is asserting that false claims to authority and power cannot keep their promises, which they could not in the face of the free God. It is only a matter of time until they are dead on the seashore.

But the criticism has another dimension. Plastaras<sup>11</sup> has seen that the narrative of liberation begins with the grieving complaint of Israel in Exodus 2:23-25:

And the people of Israel groaned under their bondage, and cried out for help, and their cry under bondage came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant. . . . And God saw the people of Israel, and God knew their condition.

I will urge later that the real criticism begins in the capacity to grieve because that is the most visceral announcement that things are not right. Only in the empire are we pressed and urged and invited to pretend that things are all right—either in the dean's office or in our marriage or in the hospital room. And as long as

the empire can keep the pretense alive that things are all right, there will be no real grieving and no serious criticism.

But think what happens if the Exodus is the primal scream that permits the beginning of history.<sup>12</sup> In the verb "cry out" (*za'ak*) there is a bit of ambiguity because on the one hand it is a cry of misery and wretchedness with some self-pity, while it also functions for the official filing of a legal complaint. The mournful one is the plaintiff. As Erhart Gerstenberger<sup>13</sup> has observed, it is characteristic of Israel to complain rather than lament; that is, Israel does not voice resignation but instead expresses a militant sense of being wronged with the powerful expectation that it will be heard and answered. Thus the history of Israel begins on the day when its people no longer address the Egyptian gods who will not listen and cannot answer. The life of freedom and justice comes when they risk the freedom of the free God against the regime.

The grieving of Israel, perhaps self-pity and surely complaint but never resignation, is the beginning of criticism. It is made clear that things are not as they should be, not as they were promised, and not as they must be and will be. Bringing hurt to public expression is an important first step in the dismantling criticism that permits a new reality, theological and social, to emerge. That cry which begins history is acknowledged by Yahweh as history gathers power:

I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians. (Exod. 3:7-8)

And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you. . . . (Exod. 3:9-10)

That cry which is the primal criticism is articulated again in 8:12. Moses and Aaron now know that serious intervention and intercession must be made to Yahweh the God of freedom and not to the no-gods of Egypt. In 5:8 and 15 there is still a cry to Pharaoh, still a looking to the empire for help and relief: "Therefore they cry, let us go and offer sacrifice to our God. . . .

Then the foremen of the people of Israel came and cried to Pharaoh. . . ."

By the middle of the plague cycle Israel has disengaged from the empire, cries no more to it, expects nothing of it, acknowledges it in no way, knows it cannot keep its promises, and knows that nothing is either owed it or expected of it. That is the ultimate criticism which leads to dismantling.

In the narrative criticism moves and builds. The grieving cry learns to turn away from false listeners and turn toward the one who can help. Prophetic criticism, as Dorothee Soelle has suggested,<sup>14</sup> consists in mobilizing people to their real restless grief and in nurturing them away from cry-hearers who are inept at listening and indifferent in response. Surely history consists primarily in speaking and being answered, in crying and being heard. If that is true it means there can be no history in the empire because the cries are never heard and the speaking is never answered. And if the task of prophecy is to empower people to engage in history, then it means evoking cries that expect answers, learning to address them where they will be taken seriously, and ceasing to look to the numbed and dull empire that never intended to answer in the first place.

Curiously, the criticism of cry is intensified as the narrative develops. In the report of 11:6 and 12:30 the mighty empire cries out:

And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt as there has never been, nor ever shall be again. (11:6)

And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he, and all his servants, and all the Egyptians; and there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where one was not dead. (12:30)

Both times the cry concerns the killing of the firstborn, the ones born to rule. That is highly ironic, for now the self-sufficient and impervious regime is reduced to the role of a helpless suppliant. The cry of Israel becomes an empowering cry; the cry of Egypt is one of dismantling helplessness. But it is too late. History has begun and the initiative has been taken by the new God for the new community. The empire is left to grieve over its days of not

caring and its gods of order and its politics of injustice, which are all now ended. Criticism has reached its goal.

(3) The alternative consciousness wrought by Moses also provides a model for energizing. Moses and this narrative create the sense of new realities that can be trusted and relied upon just when the old realities had left us hopeless. It is the task of the prophet to bring to expression the new realities against the more visible ones of the old order. Energizing is closely linked to hope. We are energized not by that which we already possess but by that which is promised and about to be given. It is the tendency of liberals to rail and polemicize, but in the lack of faith or bad faith of so many it is not believed that something is about to be given. Egypt was without energy precisely because it did not believe anything was promised and about to be given. Egypt, like every imperial and eternal now, believed everything was already given, contained, and possessed. If there is any point at which most of us are manifestly co-opted, it is in this way. We do not believe that there will be newness but only that there will be merely a moving of the pieces into new patterns.

It is precisely the prophet who speaks against such managed data and who can energize toward futures that are genuinely new and not derived. I suggest three energizing dimensions to this narrative that are important for prophetic imagination.

First, energy comes from the embrace of the inscrutable darkness.<sup>15</sup> That darkness which is frightening in its authority appears here in the hardness of heart. That motif pervades this strange text. At every turn, it is affirmed not that Pharaoh's heart is hard but that Yahweh hardens it. It is Yahweh's peculiar way of bringing the empire to an end. It is Yahweh's odd way to present the possibility of historical freedom. There is more here than can be understood, but whatever else it means it begins in the conviction that God works on both sides of the street. The despairing ones do not see how a newness can come, how evil can be overcome, or how futures can arise from the totalitarian present. This awesome programmatic statement affirms that something is "on the move" in the darkness that even the lord of the darkness does not discern. It is strange that neither Egypt nor



Israel understands the movement in the darkness! Israel is no more privy to God's freedom than Egypt is. And when Israel yearns to know too much about that freedom, Israel easily plays the role of Egypt. In any case, this narrative knows that the darkness may be trusted to him as it surely cannot be trusted to Pharaoh. That is energizing because the alternative community dares to affirm how it will turn out. It knows what Pharaoh does not know. It knows, but it does not understand. It knows because it has submitted, and that submission began when the cry was cried toward the free one. There is new energy in finding one who can be trusted with the darkness and who can be trusted to be more powerful than the one who ostensibly rules the light.

Second, in 11:7 there is a wondrous statement of a new reality that surely must energize: "But against any of the people of Israel, either man or beast, not a dog shall growl; that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between the Egyptians and Israel." In our scholarly ways we may miss the power here. It is too terrible to be contained in a "doctrine of election." It occurs not in a doctrine but in a narrative and an unproven memory that we must let stand in all its audaciousness. It is not reflective theology but news just for this moment and just for this community. The God who will decide is not the comfortable god of the empire, so fat and well fed as to be neutral and inattentive. Rather, it is the God who is alert to the realities, who does not flinch from taking sides, who sits in the divine council on the edge of his seat and is attentive to his special interests. It is the way of the unifying gods of the empire not to take sides and by being tolerant to cast eternal votes for the way things are.

We may pause here to note the kind of theological reflection in which this primal prophetic narrative engages. There is not much here for the systematic theologian. No prophet ever sees things under the aspect of eternity. It is always partisan theology, always for the moment, always for the concrete community, satisfied to see only a piece of it all and to speak out of that at the risk of contradicting the rest of it.<sup>16</sup> Empires prefer systematic theologians who see it all, who understand both sides, and who regard polemics as unworthy of God and divisive of the public

good. But what an energizing statement! It is like Andrew Young, who takes sides with losers and powerless marginal people, who has not yet grown cynical with the "double speak" of imperial talk, who dares to speak before the data are in and dares to affront more subtle thinking. The affirmation whispered in the barracks is that he is "up front" about his commitments and Pharaoh is not going to like it.

Seen at a distance, this bald statement is high theology. It is the gospel; *God is for us*. In an empire no god is for anyone. They are old gods who don't care anymore and have tried everything once and have a committee studying all the other issues. For Moses and Israel energizing comes not out of sociological strategy or hunches about social dynamic but out of the freedom of God. And so the urging I make to those who would be prophets is that we not neglect to do our work about who God is and that we know our discernment of God is at the breaking points in human community.

Third, the great song of Moses is the most eloquent, liberating, and liberated song in Israel. The last energizing reality is a doxology in which the singers focus on this free One and in the act of the song appropriate the freedom of God as their own freedom. In his recent typology David Noel Freedman places this song at the head of the period of militant Mosaic Yahwism.<sup>17</sup> By a study of divine names he observes the repeated use of the name, the very name of freedom which Egypt couldn't tolerate and the freedom slaves could not anticipate. The speaking of the name already provides a place in which an alternative community can live. So prophets might reflect on the name of God, on what his name is, on what it means, on where it can be spoken, and by whom it might be spoken. There is something direct and primitive about the name in these most primal songs of faith and freedom. Egypt is wont to hedge the name with adjectives and all manner of qualifiers, but the community of justice practicing the freedom of God cannot wait for all that.

Prophecy cannot be separated very long from doxology or it will either wither or become ideology. Abraham Heschel has seen most wondrously how doxology is the last full act of human



freedom and justice.<sup>18</sup> The prophetic community might ponder what the preconditions of doxology are and what happens when doxologies that address this One are replaced by television jingles that find us singing consumerism ideology to ourselves and to each other. In that world there may be no prophet and surely no freedom. In that world where jingles replace doxology, God is not free and the people know no justice or compassion.

The energy of Moses' doxology includes:

- (a) The speaking of a new name that redefines all social perception.
- (b) A review of an unlikely history of inversion in which imperial reality is nullified. (Obviously that is not the kind of history taught in the royal court school.)
- (c) An asking for the enactment of freedom in dance, freedom in free bodies that Pharaoh could no longer dominate (15:20). (We may ponder about the loss of freedom for our bodies and about the ideological dimensions of the current wrath about human sexuality.)
- (d) A culmination in enthronement, the assertion of the one reality Egypt could not permit or tolerate: "The Lord will reign for ever and ever" (Exod. 15:18). (We must learn that such doxologies are always polemical; the unstated counter-theme, only whispered, is always "and not Pharaoh.")

It is only a poem and we might say rightly that singing a song does not change reality. However, we must not say that with too much conviction. The evocation of an alternative reality consists at least in part in the battle for language and the legitimization of a new rhetoric. The language of the empire is surely the language of managed reality, of production and schedule and market. But that language will never permit or cause freedom because there is no newness in it. Doxology is the ultimate challenge to the language of managed reality and it alone is the universe of discourse in which energy is possible.<sup>19</sup>

It is worth asking how the language of doxology can be practiced in the empire. Only where there is doxology is there any

emergence of compassion, for doxology cuts through the ideology that pretends to be a given. Only where there is doxology can there be justice, for such songs transfigure fear into energy.

I shall not now explore further the second and third Mosaic memories of sojourn and Sinai, although that is worth doing. The wilderness theme asks about immobilizing satiation; the Sinai theme speaks of God's freedom for the neighbor. Taken altogether, the Mosaic tradition affirms three things:

- 1. The alternative life is lived in this very particular historical and historicizing community.
- 2. This community criticizes and energizes by its special memories that embrace discontinuity and genuine breaks from imperial reality.
- 3. This community, gathered around the memories, knows it is defined by and is at the disposal of a God who as yet is unco-opted and uncontained by the empire.

and a new history begins for those who stood outside of history. This new history gives persons new identities (Matt. 28:19) and a new ethic (v. 20), even as it begins on the seashore among the dead enslavers (Exod. 14:30).

## 7

### A NOTE ON THE PRACTICE OF MINISTRY

FIRST LET ME SUMMARIZE the argument. Something new happened in history with the Exodus and the Moses movement. On the one hand, Moses intended the dismantling of the oppressive empire of Pharaoh and on the other hand he intended the formation of a new community focused on the religion of God's freedom and the politics of justice and compassion. The *dismantling* begins in the groans and laments of his people; the *energizing* begins in the doxologies of the new community.

The Moses movement is too radical for Israel, however, and so soon there is an attempt to counter the new history of energy. The old history of Pharaoh is continued in the monarchy of Israel. The monarchy, with its interest in self-securing, is effective in *silencing the criticism* and *denying the energizing*, but the kings never seem able to end the prophets. The prophets of Israel continue the radical movement of Moses in the face of royal reality. On the one hand, *Jeremiah practices the radical criticism* against the royal consciousness. He does this essentially by conjuring a funeral and bringing the grief of dying Israel to public expression. He does this to penetrate the numb denial of the royal community which pretended that things must go on forever. On the other hand, *Second Isaiah practices radical energizing* against the royal consciousness. He does this by conjuring an enthronement and bringing the amazement of rebirthed Israel to public expression. He

does this to penetrate the weary despair of the royal community, which assumed things were over forever.

Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet, and more than a prophet we argue, practiced in most radical form the main elements of prophetic ministry and imagination. On the one hand, he practiced criticism of the deathly world around him. The dismantling was fully wrought in his crucifixion, in which he himself embodied the thing dismantled. On the other hand, he practiced the energizing of the new future given by God. This energizing was fully wrought in his resurrection, in which he embodied the new future given by God.

Second, this note is concerned with the practice of ministry. Without this note the entire discussion lacks the concreteness appropriate to discussions of the prophetic. Without precluding peculiar ministries in special places, it is presumed that the practice of ministry is done by those who stand in conventional places of parish life and other forms of ministry derived from that model. We cling to the conviction that prophetic ministry can and must be practiced there, although many things militate against it. First, the ministry is consumed by the daily round of busyness that cannot be ignored; perhaps that daily pressure may be reduced but it cannot be ignored. Second, the ministry most often exists in congregations that are bourgeois, if not downright obdurate, and in which there is no special openness to or support of prophetic ministry.

Other things can be said as well and I have tried to say some of them in this book. I have tried to say that prophetic ministry does not consist of spectacular acts of social crusading or of abrasive measures of indignation. Rather, prophetic ministry consists of offering an alternative perception of reality and in letting people see their own history in the light of God's freedom and his will for justice. The issues of God's freedom and his will for justice are not always and need not be expressed primarily in the big issues of the day. They can be discerned wherever people try to live together and worry about their future and their identity. So these urgings come from our study:

(1) The task of prophetic ministry is to evoke an alternative

community that knows it is about different things in different ways. And that alternative community has a variety of relationships with the dominant community.

(2) The practice of prophetic ministry is not some special thing done two days a week. Rather, it is done in, with, and under all the acts of ministry—as much in counseling as in preaching, as much in liturgy as in education. It concerns a stance and posture or a hermeneutic about the world of death and the word of life that can be brought to light in every context.

(3) Prophetic ministry seeks to penetrate the numbness to face the body of death in which we are caught. Clearly, the numbness sometimes evokes from us rage and anger, but the numbness is more likely to be penetrated by grief and lament. Death, and that is our state, does not require indignation as much as it requires anguish and the sharing in the pain. The public sharing of pain is one way to let the reality sink in and let the death go.

(4) Prophetic ministry seeks to penetrate despair so that new futures can be believed in and embraced by us. There is a yearning for energy in a world grown weary. And we do know that the only act that energizes is a word, a gesture, an act that believes in our future and affirms it to us disinterestedly.

In a society that knows about initiative and self-actualization and countless other things, the capacity to lament the death of the old world is nearly lost. In a society strong on self-congratulation, the capacity to receive in doxology the new world being given is nearly lost. Grief and praise are ways of prophetic criticism and energy, which can be more intentional even in our age.

Third, as I reflect on ministry, and especially my ministry, I know in the hidden places that the real restraints are not in my understanding or in the receptivity of other people. Rather, the restraints come from my own unsureness about this perception. I discover that I am as bourgeois and obdurate as any to whom I might minister. I, like most of the others, am unsure that the royal road is not the best and the royal community the one which governs the real "goodies." I, like most of the others, am unsure that the alternative community inclusive of the poor, hungry, and grieving is really the wave of God's future. We are indeed

"like people, like priest" (Hos. 4:9). That very likely is the situation among many of us in ministry and there is no unanguished way out of it. It does make clear to us that our ministry will always be practiced through our own conflicted selves. No prophet has ever borne an unconflicted message, even until Jesus (cf. Mark 14:36). Thus the Beatitudes end in realism (Luke 6:22-23). Also, it reminds us again that such radical faith is not an achievement, for if it were we would will it and be done. Rather, it is a gift and we are left to wait receptively, to watch and to pray.

Perhaps our own situation credits what we have suggested here. We ourselves shall likely move in and out, precisely because of our poor capacity to grieve the death in our own lives and to be amazed at the new futures. We are not more skilled in that than all the other children of the royal community, and therefore we must engage in the same painful practices of becoming who we are called to be. I have come to think there is no more succinct summary of prophetic ministry than the statement of Jesus "Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh" (Luke 6:21), or, more familiarly, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:4).

Jesus' concern was, finally, for the joy of the kingdom. That is what he promised and to that he invited people. But he was clear that the rejoicing in that future required a grieving about the present order.<sup>1</sup> Jesus takes a quite dialectical two-age view of things. He will not be like one-world liberals who view the present world as the only one, nor will he be like the unworldly who yearn for the future with an unconcern about the present. There is work to be done in the present. There is grief work to be done in the present that the future may come. There is mourning to be done for those who do not know of the deathliness of their situation. There is mourning to be done with those who know pain and suffering and lack the power or freedom to bring it to speech. The saying is a harsh one, for it sets this grief work as the precondition of joy. It announces that those who have not cared enough to grieve will not know joy.

The mourning is a precondition in another way too. It is not a formal, external requirement but rather the only door and route

to joy. Seen in that context, this is not just a neat saying but a summary of the entire theology of the cross. Only that kind of anguished disengagement permits fruitful yearning and only the public embrace of deathliness permits newness to come. We are at the edge of knowing this in our personal lives, for we understand a bit of the processes of grieving.<sup>2</sup> But we have yet to learn and apply it to the reality of society. And finally, we have yet to learn it about God, who grieves in ways hidden from us and who waits to rejoice until his promises are fully kept.