

Chapter 3

Biblical Foundation on Homelessness

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1) Introduction:

The motivation for the Christian Church to engage in finding a solution to the homeless problem must be based on the teachings of Scripture. Toward that end, this chapter reviews the Biblical teachings and policies for the poor, oppressed and homeless in the Old and New Testaments. Understanding God's policy for the poor will help the Church to measure how close or far they stand from God, do a self-critique of their mission and motivate the Church to be engaged in the mission of ending homelessness.

a) God's Perfect Home, Oikos (Gen. 1–2)

God starts with a perfect home for human beings. In the beginning, God created the first human couple in God's own image and blessed them as a community. The first home God created for them in the Garden was filled with an abundance of everything they needed. In this household, where God was the host and the rest were guests, God's policy for them was to live in peace and harmony caring for one another. (Gen. 1:26-2:24)¹ That is, the first home God created for human beings was a perfect home in the perfect city of God, ruled by the righteous household, the economist God.

b) Homelessness of the First Family (Gen. 3:23-24)

According to the policy in God's household, the first human family was given the responsibility to tend the creation and care for one another. "Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that move upon the earth" Gen. 1:28).

For most of Christian history, the concept of 'dominion' has been used to justify the ruthless detachment from and exploitation of the natural world. However, originally 'dominion' meant 'stewardship.' The first human family was given the special responsibility of being Gods' custodians.² However, they violated God's intent for them to be good stewards. Instead, they desired to be like God, asserting their independence and pursuing self-interest, above God's will. The couple was thrown out of their home and the first human homelessness thus begins.

2) Israel's Homelessness as a Nation

a) Hebrews, the Homeless Wonderers

To explain the Hebrew's homelessness, an understanding of the origin of the name 'Hebrew' is important. According to the study done by Kang:

In Gen. 14:13, Abraham is called Habiru, meaning 'Hebrew.' In Gen. 41: 12, Joseph was also called 'Hebrew.' Therefore, Habiru was the name for Abraham and his family. It actually originates from the word *sa-gaz* of the Ur III Tablet which was translated as Habbatu. The word *sa-gaz* appears on the Tablet of 2000–1800 BC, which originally meant

¹ Meeks, *The Economist*, 12. Meeks suggests that household and economy are interrelated, calling the Creator God "the economist." "The root of Greek word economy, *oikonomia*, is a compound of *oikos*, household, and *nomos*, law or management. Therefore, economy means literally "the law or the management of the household." Household is connected with the production, distribution, and consumption of the necessities of life. Therefore, household means the site of economy, the site of human livelihood. The Economy of God is the distribution of God's righteousness. There is always enough to go around if the righteousness of God is present.

² Rifkin, *European Dream*, 381.

a ‘robber.’ In the City of Mari written on the Tablet of 2500 BC, this word was used for a ‘group of nomads,’ or ‘those who crossed the river,’ (came from beyond the river), or ‘the ones who always carried their own food.’ Therefore, it was a name for Terah and Abraham. On the Nuji Tablet, Habiru was a slave or a hired servant. On Alalakh it was used as soldiers who came from other countries. People believed that the Habiru were polluting and threatening the region near Egypt. Therefore, the Israelites were wandering nomads having no nation of their own. They were a pain to others. In those days, people beyond the river were the trouble makers. Noah and Lamech and his children were living in the southern part of Mesopotamia. Accordingly, Shem, Terrah and Abraham also lived in Ur.³

Israel’s history begins with Abraham, son of Terrah, the Hebrew. He left Ur, his ancestral homeland in southern Mesopotamia. He journeys to Haran, a city in Northwestern Mesopotamia, and from there to the land of Canaan. (Gen. 11:31-12:5) Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Gen. 12:1-2).

The reason why Abraham left his home town Ur and became a wandering sojourner [homeless] in Canaan and later in Egypt (Gen. 12:1-9; 12:10-16; 20:13) can be understood from religious and socio-economic/political context of the time.

Religious perspective:

It was God who sent him. “In Gen. 12:1-9 Abraham is presented as the perfectly faithful man. He is called by God and he goes. He relies on the name (12:8) and word (12:1-4a) of this God who has suddenly inverted his life. The call of God is fully embraced. Abraham is offered as a model for the faith of Israel (as Heb. 11 attests).”⁴

Sociopolitical perspective:

Kang offers an exegesis of Gen. 20:13 to explain the socio-political circumstances that caused Abraham to leave his home town and become homeless. The context of the text is Abraham’s encounter with the King Abimelech in Gerar. “And when **God caused** me to wander from my father’s house”(Gen. 20:10-13).[*Emphasis mine*]

The word ‘God’ Abraham used is *Elohim* but the verb ‘caused’ is plural, which means *Elohim* (God) is also plural. In fact, when *Elohim* is God, the verb ‘caused’ must be singular. But when the verb is plural, *Elohim* must be plural also. In those days when *Elohim* was plural it meant pagan gods, angels, kings, or rulers. Abraham must have understood what *Elohim* meant when it was singular or plural. Therefore, it looks as though Abraham placed his *Elohim* God on the same level as pagan gods. It appears that he wasn’t clear about who caused him to leave Ur—Yahweh God or pagan god, kings or rulers. While he could have recognized that Yahweh God did it, he could also have conveniently used a plural verb when he spoke to King Abimelech to please him by saying that he too believed in pagan gods as Abimelech did. However, historically pagan rulers conquered Ur III. At the time there were also constant wars in the outskirts of the Ur III Empire which made Ur citizens nervous. Many of them in fact left Ur and Abraham could have been one of those the political circumstance caused him to leave.⁵

³ Shin T. Kang, *Bible Study Correspondence Course* (Poulsbo, WA: Five Words Bible Society, 2004), 42.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation – A Bible Commentary on Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 125.

⁵ Kang, *Bible Study*, 49-51.

At any rate, Abraham became a sojourner in the land of Canaan because “at that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites lived in the land. (Gen. 13:7b) ‘Sojourner’ is a word usually meaning ‘resident alien.’ It means to be in a place, perhaps for an extended time, to live there and take some roots, but always to be an outsider, never belonging, always without rights, title, or voice in decisions that matter.⁶

b) Egyptian Bondage (Gen. 37:12-50:26; Ex. 1:1-2:22)

In Canaan, Abram’s son Isaac is born, and Isaac, in turn, becomes the father of Jacob, also called Israel. (Genesis 32:28) During a famine, Jacob and his 12 sons, the ancestors of the 12 tribes of Israel, leave Canaan and settle in Egypt in 1876 B.C.E, where their descendants become slaves.”⁷

In the Joseph narrative (Gen. 37-50), Egypt is the breadbasket of that part of the world to which others came in the midst of famine. (Gen. 12:10-20) Although a land of abundance, Egypt was also portrayed in Gen. 47:13-26 as a monopolizing power that deprived peasants of their land and livelihood.⁸

Brueggemann notes that Israel’s first moment of landedness is its *settlement in Egypt* under Joseph. (Gen. 47:6-27) In that land Israel did not sojourn; it *dwelt* there, securely settled.⁹ [*Emphasis mine.*] However, it is debatable if sojourners can ever be at home in foreign country.

Joseph grew up to be Pharaoh’s economist and managed the food stores so well that he redeemed the nation from famine. His policy was to use famine as a way of centralizing power, gaining control over the land, and creating a labor force. In the midst of extreme famine the people came to Joseph to buy food. Joseph’s economic policy was that when their money had run out, he required them to pay with their cattle and flocks and asses, their means of livelihood and work. When money and stock were gone, he required their land and work in exchange for food. The land became Pharaoh’s. And as for the people, he made slaves of them. Joseph’s management policy of pharaoh’s economy had certainly been successful at first. But his policy became inhumane. Israel being in the land soon led to slavery. Egypt’s prosperity (Ex. 1:7) then resulted in oppression. (Ex. 1:8-9)¹⁰

The political context that forced Israelites into slavery in Egypt is explained by Kang:

Under the rule of Amenemhet III, Egypt rose as a great empire in the region, expanding its territory and achieving great prosperity, power and peace in the region. Many people from Asia migrated to Egypt. This is when Abraham went down to Egypt. Perhaps the king Joseph served was Amenemhet I. The sudden migration from overseas caused problems because 100-140 years later their descendants became rulers of the country. In 1786-1551

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 7.

⁷ P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. “The Patriarchal Age,” revised by Ronald S. Hendel, in *Ancient Israel*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall and Washington D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, co-pub., 1999), 1-3. McCarter has calculated: Abram’s departure for Canaan was 2091 B.C.E. and the full time the Patriarchs spent in Canaan before going to Egypt was 215 years, from 2091 to 1876 B.C.E.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 59.

⁹ Brueggemann, *The Land*, 9.

¹⁰ Meeks, *The Economist*, 78-79. (Gen. 41:1-57; 47:13- 26)

B.C.E. the Hiksos kingdom (king of shepherds, foreign rulers) ruled Egypt including Syria-Palestine. After that, Ah-Moses I had overthrown these foreign-born rulers and Egyptians regained the rule of Egypt. At this time Ah-Moses began to feel nervous about the presence and numbers of the Hebrews, their wealth and power, and about the possibility that these Hebrews might join the enemy if Egypt fights against Asians and the remnant nations of Hiksos and that the Hebrews can go back to Canaan which would cause an Egyptian economic downturn, and foreign domination again. Ah-Moses seized power in a campaign to throw out all the Hebrews, because they outnumbered others and had the strongest economic power. This is when Ah-Moses began to reduce the number of Hebrews. After his first son Thut-Moses II ruled for 3 years, his wife Hat-shep-sut ruled 1490-1468 B.C.E. After Thut-Moses III died, his son Amen-Hopis became the king of the Egypt and was the one who imposed forced labor on the Hebrews and became the rival to Moses (Ex. 1:13-14).¹¹

Joseph's people then were the ones who built the Pharaoh's storehouses, as slaves. To be slaves meant to be excluded from the household while providing the life conditions for others.¹² Thus they became homeless under bondage in the land of Egypt.

c. Exodus (Ex. 2:23-25; 3:7)

Israel perceived the central quality of God was compassion. As Tribble points out, the word 'compassion' comes from the Hebrew noun *rahamim*; in its singular form the noun *rehem* means 'womb' or 'uterus.' In the plural form, *rahamim*, means 'compassion, mercy, and love.' As the womb protects and nourishes God does the same.¹³ God felt *rahamim* for suffering Israel just like a mother would feel *rahamim* for her child of her won womb. God's *rahamim* is expressed, "Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them. "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings"(Ex. 2:23-25; 3:7).

This God's *rahamim* is God's *pain* for Israel's *pain*: [*Emphasis mine*]. "In Old Testament prophecy (Is. 53), Israel's freedom has its deepest root in God's own suffering. The servant of God liberates by taking the suffering on himself; 'Upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed.'" (Is. 53:5). Freedom born out of suffering is not privilege and is not exclusive. Israel's freedom born out of God's suffering will bring freedom to the nations but not demand sacrifices.¹⁴

God's *rahamim* and love made God *dwell* among and in the suffering people. [*Emphasis mine*] This is the God who dwells among the slaves, who makes God's home among the forsaken so that they can come out into a new home of freedom. This God has a domicile in a people who are no people.¹⁵ God's *rahamim* sides with the oppressed and

¹¹ Kang, *Bible Study*, 72-73. Hat-shep-sut was the one who adopted Moses as his son and named him.

¹² Meeks, *The Economist*, 80.

¹³ Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 33.

¹⁴ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1983), 60.

¹⁵ Meeks, *The Economist*, 78, 80-82. Borg stresses that a woman feels compassion for the child of her own womb; a man feels compassion for his brother, who comes from the same womb. As a feeling, compassion is located in a certain part of the body—namely, in the loins. In women, as one would expect,

suffering, “Moses is told that *God takes sides in the struggle*, which introduces fantastic new possibilities. [*Emphasis mine*] And, as is the consistent pattern throughout the Bible, God does not side with the powerful, the friends of Pharaoh who think they hold history in the palms of their hands, but with the slaves, who up to this moment have had nothing in the palms of their hands but calluses.”¹⁶ God always sides with the oppressed. A God siding with the tyrants would be a God of malevolence; a God siding with no one would appear to be a God of indifference but would also be a God of malevolence, giving support to the tyrants by not opposing them; only a God siding with the oppressed would be a God of justice, a God worthy of the name.¹⁷

Liberation from Egyptian bondage is Israel’s *salvation story*. In the Hebrew language the verb ‘to save’ means ‘to provide open space’ for the oppressed:

The word ‘salvation’ is first used in the Bible in connection with a political liberation. More than 3000 years ago some Israelites were forced into slave labor in Egypt. They had to build garrison towns for the army of the mighty Pharaoh Rameses II. Ancient mural paintings found in Egypt show Israelite laborers at work, carrying heavy stones while being cruelly beaten by slave drivers. The Israelites cried out to God, God called Moses and sent him to Pharaoh, and Israelites finally received salvation. That means that they were given room to move, out of the prison of slavery into the open space of the desert. There they found not only space to live in but the space God lives in. . . . It not only opens the space by which prisoners can move out into freedom; it also opens the space, heaven, from where God reaches down and makes a marriage covenant with his people.¹⁸

The Exodus experience was also a fight between Yahweh God and pagan gods. God brought ten plagues to the Pharaoh of hardened heart to liberate Israelites from the Egyptian slavery. The plaguing was Yahweh’s demand for Egyptians to give up their

this means in the womb; in men, in the bowels. Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995), 47.

¹⁶ Robert McAfee Brown, *Unexpected News* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 37. MacAfee Brown asserts that *God calls people to join in the struggle*. Moses will be God’s emissary to Pharaoh, the one through whom, along with the other Israelites, God’s determination to liberate them will actually be accomplished. The people, trusting in the power of the Lord, are to be *the vehicle of their own liberation*. God will not do it without their help. They must act on their own behalf. God, while intervening on behalf of the weak, is quite prepared to use the weak. Moses, to offer a brilliant example, is as weak as they come; he ducks and weaves in every possible way to avoid the body blow of an assignment, piling up excuses ranging from the fact that he doesn’t know God’s name to the fact that he stutters and would therefore be an ineffective negotiator with Pharaoh. A beautiful example of God’s enlisting the people in their own struggle occurs in the account (Ex. 1:15-22), demonstrating that the real heroes of the liberation are actually heroines—a fact our male-dominated scriptures usually cover up: Pharaoh instructs the Hebrew midwives to kill the sons of any Hebrew women at whose births they are assisting. They ignore the king’s instruction telling him that Hebrew women deliver their own babies without help by the time the midwives get there. *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁸ Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Experiments with Bible Study* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1981), 120. Abraham Malamat of Hebrew University suggests, “Not to look for a specific date for the Exodus because it involved a steady flow of Israelites from Egypt over hundreds of years. If the Exodus was a durative event, as seems likely, the search for a specific date for it is futile: Nahum M. Sarna, “Israel in Egypt,” revised by Hershel Shanks, in *Ancient Israel*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall and Washington D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, co-pub., 1999), 44.

gods and know that Yahweh is the only God. Therefore, Moses was fighting against Egyptian gods.¹⁹

Meeks places the Exodus experience as the restoration of the household:

The first truly historical question of Israel is, “In whose household and in what kind of household will it live?” Israel’s history begins in the household of slavery. Israel lives in Pharaoh’s economy. The great event of liberation is leaving the household of hated slavery. Yahweh’s exclusive right to or claim on the household of Israel is based on his liberation of them from the house of bondage. (Ex. 20:1; Deut. 5:6) “And you shall remember that you were a slave, *oiketes*, in the land of Egypt and the LORD your God brought you out” (Deut. 5:15). This God is interested in a new household whose distribution will make for a life against death. This God stands against all justifications of slavery, against making people commodities for the economic process. This God wills to create an economy of freedom.²⁰

The Exodus experience for Israel was possible by:

1) *the critique of the dominant ideology* and the refusal to accept their miserable reality (slavery) as final; 2) *the public processing of pain* (Ex. 2:23-25 and 3:7-8a); the people gave voice to their suffering communally and publicly, “an irreversible act of civil disobedience;” and 3) *the release of a new social imagination*. Israel went on to dream of a new possibility, a Promised Land where all would prosper under the blessing of Yahweh. (Ex. 3:8) Therefore, liberation from Egyptian slavery must lead to responsible living in social relationships that are liberating and just. Yahweh would reign in Israel’s liturgies, in its daily life, in the tabernacle, in their homes, fields, communities, tribes and nation.²¹

¹⁹ Kang, *Bible Study*, 84. Kang explains that the 10 plagues in the Exodus event (Ex. 7:14-12:36) meant 10 pagan gods Egyptians were worshipping that Yahweh God defeated: 1) **Water turned to blood** (Ex. 7: 14-25) represents Hapi, Isis, Khnum, gods of Nile river for prosperity but these gods will now torment Egyptians; 2) **Frogs** (Ex. 8:1-15) represent a god who helped safe child delivery but this god will now be harmful to people including children; 3) **Gnats** (Ex. 8:16-19) represent the god of wilderness but this god is now agonizing Egyptians; 4) **Flies** (Ex. 8:20-32) represent the sun-god but this god now troubles Egyptians; 5) **Livestock disease** (Ex. 9:1-7) represents Hathor god, symbolized by milkcow and Apis symbolized by a bull but these gods now destroys their livestock, their wealth; 6) **Boils** (Ex. 9:8-12) represent Sekhmet the god who controls disease and Sunu the god who heals sickness, who now make people sick; 7) **Thunder and Hail** (Ex. 9: 13-35) represent the Nut god of heaven and the god Osiris that watches over crops, now destroys crops; 8) **Locusts** (Ex. 10: 1-20) also represent the Nut god and Osiris that sent locusts (to let them eat every plant in the land -10:12); 9) **Darkness** (Ex. 10:21-29) represents Re and Horus, sun-gods, and Nut and Hathor, gods of heaven, all who now brought darkness. After all, the Egyptian gods can’t be any help to Egyptians; 10) **Death of the Firstborn** (Ex. 11:1-12:30) meant that all Egyptian gods--Heqet that appears to the mother at the childbirth, Isis that protects children and Pharaoh’s son worshiped by Egyptians--didn’t have any power to protect Egyptians when their firstborn were killed. Therefore, the Egyptian gods brought only evil upon the Egyptians.

²⁰ Meeks, *The Economist*, 78, 80-82.

²¹ Ross Kinsler and Gloria Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 7-9. Dube presents a different insight into the Exodus event. “Exodus opens with God’s mighty acts of liberation, God’s response, God’s strongest statement against slavery as a manifestation of imperialism. Nonetheless, Exodus makes no secret that the victimized losers in history somehow have the right to become victimizing winners, in turn. The resounding command to let God’s people go is unhesitatingly twined with God’s promise to give them the land of Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites—an inhabited land!”(60). Dube calls this “the literary-

Moltmann concludes therefore that, the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” is not the God of the Pharaohs, the Caesars, and the slave holders. That God is the God who led the Hebrew people out of slavery into freedom. The First Commandment begins, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Ex. 20:2). All other commandments of God are based on this fact. This is the Old Testament definition of God—God the liberator. The experience of God is therefore the experience of the exodus. Therefore the name of God means freedom.²²

d) From the Wilderness (40 years) to the Promised Land

Wilderness (Heb. *midbar*) in the Bible is fundamentally a geophysical term applied to agriculturally unexploited areas, areas immediately bordering settlements, or arid zones that lie completely outside of human domination. It is thus a place of desolation, exile, danger, and death . . . indomitable, unpredictable, and destructive . . . representing forces of chaos, the antithesis of *shalom*, often portrayed as ‘paradise’ or the ‘Promised Land.’ Wilderness also typifies exile and judgment, as well as the temporary, transitional aspect of the journey toward freedom and fulfillment, based on the exodus paradigm.²³

Jeremiah calls this wilderness ‘homelessness,’ *lo zeruah* ‘not sown’ (Jer. 2:2). Such a land is not only not sown, it is beyond cultivation. It is land without promise, without hope, where no newness can come. Perhaps that is a point of contact between the sojourning fathers who were without heir, *lo nathattah zara* (Gen. 15:3) and the wilderness folk in a land not sown, *lo zeruah*. (Jer. 2:2) The missing heir of Abraham and Sarah and the missing growth in the wilderness are the same *zera*, either ‘heir’ or ‘seed,’ both without entry to the future.²⁴

Coming Home to the Promised Land.

“God’s promise is double-edged: not only liberation *from* Egypt but liberation *for* the Promised Land. ‘I know their sufferings,’ God informs Moses, ‘and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them to a good and broad land’” (Ex. 3:7-8). God promised *political* liberation from the economic and social bondage Israel had endured. God believes that religion and politics mix.²⁵

God is seen in Israel’s homelessness in the wilderness, the sure and certain sign that God is with his people in their land of abandonment. “They have heard that you, O LORD, are in the midst of this people; for you, O LORD, are seen face to face, and your cloud

rhetorical strategies of colonial subjugation of distant lands.” (70). Musa M. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 60, 70.

²² Moltmann, *The Way*, 57-58. Moltmann relates exodus theology and resurrection theology to each other by saying, “Exodus theology is not yet resurrection theology, but resurrection theology must always include exodus theology and must again and again be embodied in acts that liberate the oppressed.”, 59.

²³ Cheryl Ann Brown, “Wilderness,” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, eds. Letty M. Russell & J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996) 315. According to Brown feminist liberation theology identifies closely with the Israelite wilderness experience, finding in it a paradigm of women’s own journey amid continued oppression, having been technically set free yet still longing for and moving toward the Promised Land of full equality and harmony. Eco-feminism affirms the linking of women and nature and maintains that patriarchalism is responsible for the oppression of both. For eco-feminists, “wilderness” signifies the wasted condition of planet Earth under patriarchal domination.

²⁴ Brueggemann, *The Land*, 29.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 37

stands over them and you go in front of them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night” (Number 14:14). “God enters into the desolation with God’s people. God subjects himself to the same circumstances as Israel. God also sojourns without roorage, with his people, en route to the fulfilling land of promise. The ancient statement of Exodus 15 ends with Yahweh himself taking his *place* after being with his people in the sojourn (Ex. 15:16-18), but it is only after the long sojourn, in the wilderness-homelessness for 40 years.”²⁶

The new land, the land given beyond the Jordan, is a sign of God’s grace, and, therefore, the land shall be secure and life-giving.²⁷ The land to Israel is a gift from Yahweh and binds Israel in new ways to the giver. (Josh. 23:14) It is not just an object to be taken and occupied. “When the LORD your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors to give you a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.....” (Deut. 6:10-11).

e) The Assyrian Exile

In Isaiah 10:5-11 we have the astonishing declaration that the leader of the Assyrian nation, Israel’s enemy, is actually God’s “rod and staff” and will be used by God for the fulfillment of God’s purposes, since God’s own people, Israel, have turned away from God as “godless nation” (Is. 10:5-6). Here is an absolute reversal of expectation and definition: the one we would call the “godless nation,” Assyria, is God’s instrument, while the one we would call God’s instrument, Israel, and is the “godless nation.”²⁸ Godlessness is homelessness.

In 721 B.C.E. the Assyrians conquered the ten northern tribes and destroyed their capital city, Samaria, and deported many of the citizens in 722/721 B.C.E. Therefore, the Northern Kingdom, in general, and Galilee in particular, became a Gentile nation.²⁹

The Assyrian invasion is described:

The devastating Assyrian siege of Israel lasted three years concluding in 722 B.C.E. with the fall of Samaria and thousands of Israelites being led into exile. As told in 2 Kings 17:6, Sargon transported the captives to Assyria and in 2 Kings 17:24 he repopulated the cities of Samaria with peoples from Babylonia and Elam (southwestern Iran). More specifically, the Israelites were resettled in Halah (northeast of Nineveh), on the Habor (the Khabur River, a

²⁶ John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998), 43. According to Callaway, “In contrast to the sweeping statements in Joshua that Israel wiped out inhabitants of the land, the Book of Judges preserves a tradition that the ancient Israelites gained possession of the land of Canaan over a long period of time, which individual tribes or groups of related tribes acting independently.” Joseph A. Callaway, *Ancient Israel*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall and Washington D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, co-pub., 1999), 56.

²⁷ Meeks, *The Economist*, 51. While the Monarchy was united (in the promised land), which lasted about a century—1030-931 B.C.E., it was the time of Israel’s glory on the international scene. Saul, David and Solomon reigned. However, the divided Monarchy—ruled by Solomon’s son Rehoboam (930-913 B.C.E.) as king of Judah (I kings 11:43) and Jeroboam as king of Israel, experienced constant warfare between Israel and Judah. The kingdom of Judah lasted from 930 to 587 B.C.E. and Israel from 930 to 722 B.C.E. Andre Lemaire (91) and McCarter, *Israel*, 129, 136-137.

²⁸ McAfee Brown, *News*, 69.

²⁹ Charles R. Page II, *Jesus & the Land* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 21.

tributary that flows south into Euphrates from the highlands of southeastern Turkey and northeastern Syria), and in the highlands of Medes (northwestern Iran).³⁰

Assyrian immigrants intermarried with the remaining Israelites and created the Samaritans, a mestizo (mix-raced) culture that the Jews came to hate passionately. Thus the people of Israel were thrown out of their homes and scattered all over the earth by foreign powers. The racial mixture in Samaria became the source of discrimination, marginalization, exclusion and homelessness by their own people in their own country.

f) **The Babylonian Exile**

Babylon was an ancient and formidable culture (located in what is now Iraq) that periodically dominated the politics and trade of the Near East. Its culture was immensely advanced in science and learning. Nebuchadnezzar had territorial ambitions to the west and south and invaded Judah several times, finally in 587 B.C.E. eliminated Judah and enacted a third deportation of Israelites to Babylon. (Jer. 52:28-30) The Deuteronomic prophetic traditions understood the disaster as deserved punishment from YHWH, Nebuchadnezzar acted at the behest of YHWH. . . . For that reason in Jer. 25:9 and 27:6, YHWH calls Nebuchadnezzar “my servant;” and in Is. 47:6, the assertion appears that YHWH, in anger, made “my people” available for the brutality of Nebuchadnezzar.³¹

“The worst destruction took place in 587 B.C.E, and another deportation to Babylon in 582 B.C.E. Many Israelites fled to neighboring lands and Egypt. So the majority of the Jews lived outside of Judah and Jerusalem, leaving behind primarily poor laborers and peasant farmers. An estimated 20,000 Jews were living in exile in Babylon. They included the bulk of the ruling classes and important families of Judah and Jerusalem.”³² Thus the Jewish nation had come to an end. (2 Kings 24, 25) Everything these people valued, everything that defined them to themselves, was gone. Their nation was no more. Jerusalem, God’s special city, was a pile of stones. The Temple, God’s earthly dwelling place, was laid waste. The priesthood, their sacred customs, their creedal statements, the social fabric that gave order to Jewish life—all was lost. Now the Jewish population was to be totally transported to Babylon. There was no hope of return.

The predicament of Judah in the final years before the destruction of Jerusalem was similar to that of Israel before the fall of Samaria. Both were small states swallowed up by great imperial powers. Both Israel and Judah suffered the same fate of being thrown into homelessness.³³ Jeremiah predicted the life of exile would be 70 years in Babylonia. (Jer. 25:11; 29:10) Although the Babylonian exiles did not live in captivity and even held positions in bank and society, the reality was that they lost their homeland and became

³⁰ Siegfried H. Horn, “The Divided Monarchy,” in *Ancient Israel*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall and Washington D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, co-pub., 1999}, 172-174.

³¹ Brueggemann, *Reverberations*, 17. The exile is usually dated 587 or 586 to 538 B.C.E., but the history of that period is complex. The first major deportation actually took place in 598 when King Jehoiachin and many officials, warriors, artisans, and elites were taken to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar.

³² Kinsler & Kinsler, *Jubilee*, 70. The exile may have been settled in isolated or abandoned areas that needed rebuilding and development. Evidently they were able to maintain their identity by living together in families and communities and by having their deposed king and his family as official representatives before the Babylonian court.

³³ Horn, *Monarchy*, 197.

Diaspora—landless, homeless people.

The Jews had once believed that God fought at their side against their enemies. They could believe that no longer. They once believed that they were a specially chosen people. They could believe that no longer. They once believed that God dwelled in Jerusalem and ruled over Judah. They could believe that no longer. They once believed that God could hear their prayers. They could believe that no longer. They once believed that they had a destiny and a future. They could believe that no longer. They once believed that God could and would care for them. They could believe that no longer. In that exile the God they had once served lost all meaning. This God could no longer be God for them. That is what being in a spiritual exile (spiritual homelessness) is all about.³⁴

Israel's coming home:

“Nebuchadnezzar went beyond the mandate of YHWH and showed no mercy toward Jerusalem (Is. 47:6-7), not only being violent toward Israel but violently opposed to YHWH, who would eventually judge and terminate Babylon: Thus the book of Jeremiah, in which Nebuchadnezzar is regarded as “my servant,” reverses direction and ends with an assault on the arrogance of Babylon who dared to act against YHWH’s people (Jer. 50-51) and with an anticipatory narrative concerning the soon-to-come fall of Babylon (Jer. 51:64; see Is. 13-14) Nebuchadnezzar—Babylon—becomes a metaphor for arrogant, autonomous power that does evil in the world in opposition to YHWH’s will.”³⁵

The Sociopolitical Aspect of Israel's Liberation (coming home) from Babylon.

According to Second Isaiah, in 539 Babylon fell to the army of Cyrus, the King of Persia. Cyrus’ domestic policy was very different from that of his predecessors, the Assyrians and Babylonians, both of whom had used exile as a means of subduing their conquered peoples. Cyrus seems to have believed that the various national groups within his empire would be more cooperative if they were allowed a large measure of autonomy, including the exercise of their own religious customs upon their native soil. His policy was to send the exiles home, including the Jews, carrying with them the idols of their deities that the Babylonians had seized. It was within this context that the restoration of the Jerusalem community, (coming home) promised by Ezekiel and others, took place.³⁶

The Religious Aspect of Israel's Liberation (coming home) from Babylon:

Jeremiah states that God felt compassion and grief for the suffering Israel in captivity and acted to bring them back home.

I will bring them back to the land that I gave to their ancestors and they shall take possession of it . . . for I am going to save you from far away and your offspring from the land of their captivity. I am going to restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob, and have compassion on his dwellings; the city shall be rebuilt upon its mound. . . . And you shall be my people, and I will be your God. . . . Ephraim my dear son, “Is he the child I delight in?” As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him. (Jer. 30: 3- 31:30)

³⁴ Spong, *Change or Die*, 27-29.

³⁵ Brueggemann, *Reverberations*, 18.

³⁶ James D. Newsome, Jr., *The Hebrew Prophets* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 140-141.

Second Isaiah (46:1-4; 45:1-7; 41:17-19; 44:26; 44:28; 43:18-19) describes the return of Israel to its homeland, “Babylonian gods fall before Yahweh’s power” (46:1-4). Babylonian tyranny yields to Persian liberation (45:1-7) at the behest of Yahweh. Dry places in the wilderness are transformed into nourishment. (41:17-19) Forlorn Jerusalem will be restored and rebuilt. (44:26) The temple will be reactivated. (44:28) The newness comes neither from Israel’s faith nor from Persian generosity. It comes when Yahweh reasserts his rule over all turf and his restoration of his people in his land. “Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God! See, the LORD GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him’” (Is. 40:9-10).

This is the gospel, “Behold your God!” God comes, God rules. God gathers. God carries. God leads. This is the new history.³⁷ Ezekiel too was aware of Yahweh’s presence beyond judgment (Babylon); Yahweh is with the people, wherever they may be, bringing them life (1:28). “Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendor all around. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.” This was an indication that Yahweh had not abandoned his people, but was with them in their exile, homelessness.

Ezekiel presents two significant visions that signify Israel’s coming home; one is in Ezek. 47:3-12; the vision of the river of life which flows from the New Temple portrays the salvation of God in terms of restoration of life out of death (coming home from Babylonian exile). The other is in Ezek. 37:11-12, 21: “Then he said to me, ‘Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel.’ They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. . . . I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land.”

The Kingship of Yahweh leads to homecoming. Rule by Yahweh means the end of homelessness because he is a God who wills land for his people. Yahweh wills neither chaos nor exile, neither alienation nor homelessness but (Is. 45:18-19) wills homecoming. This is the new thing, that in a history of homelessness God’s powerful purpose for home has intervened, and it is never the same again. (Is. 51:2-3; 54:1-3; 54:9-10; 54:17; Gen. 9:1,7) Announce well-being in the new land. (55:3; cf. 54:13) God’s policy for the land is that the land is redivided and given to prisoners and other outcasts. The land is a gift given by the One who has pity (Hos. 2:23), who leads and guides. (cf. Ps. 23:1-3) The outcasts are given places and comforted. To be comforted is to be given a home.³⁸

The Second Isaiah announces Israel’s coming home in 40:1-5 and states God will make a highway which help Israel cut straight across the desert (the shorter route from Babylon to Jerusalem), leveling mountains and elevating valleys along the way. It will become the pathway for the returning exiles that, having entered Babylon in sorrow and defeat, will depart in triumphant joy. Here Newsome emphasizes that Israel’s coming home was not by the nations’ virtue of even its repentance, but by the gracious character of Yahweh. By

³⁷ Brueggemann, *The Land*, 147.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 148-150.

means of God's gracious act, all humankind will know that Yahweh, the sole God, is active in the life of this people Israel.³⁹

According to Third Isaiah, two groups are singled out for special treatment: The *gentiles* are clearly to be participants in the glories of this new age, an understanding consistent with that of the Second Isaiah, but just as clearly they will occupy a subservient position, a viewpoint not shared with Second Isaiah. *Foreigners* will join themselves to Yahweh. (56:6) They and "aliens" will serve Yahweh in the age to come. (61:5-6)⁴⁰

3) The Homeless Poor in the O.T. Context **Introduction:**

The social and economic system of the Hebrews differed dramatically from anything around them. The Egyptian monarchy and the city-states of Palestine were highly centralized in structure. Excessive service and wealth were given to royalty. Slavery and class distinctions were the norm, and power and violent force were tools of social order. A weak king and ineffective military meant almost certain social chaos or takeover by an outside power. Lesser nations sought, through alliance or tribute payments, to maintain autonomy as long as possible, but loyalty to agreements meant little when alternative opportunity appeared. Income distribution was unequal by design. Challenging this way of doing things made little sense since no alternatives seemed practical. Into this world, God called a people and presented them with values that seemed hopelessly radical. The entire pyramid of power was inverted so that the household, rather than the royalty became the focus of attention. Family, clan, tribe, and nation were designed to support the household in all affairs of life. God wants social structure to protect against destitution and alienation. A decentralized web of mutual responsibility and accountability among all groupings of society was God's design for his people, rather than the top-down, royalty-to-serf structure of Israel's contemporaries. Therefore, in many respects, God's intention for his people were radically countercultural, and his covenant with the Hebrews required that they be faithful to his expectation if they were to receive his blessing and protection.⁴¹ However the Hebrews were repeatedly unfaithful to God's command.

a) The Poor, Widows and Orphans

In the O.T., the subject of the poor is the second most prominent theme. Idolatry is the first, and the two are often connected.⁴² This section will bring out a few stories of the

³⁹ Newsome, *Prophets*, 152-153.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 175.

Just as the long journey to come home to the Promised land, the return to and restoration of Jerusalem took place in stages over at least the next 100 years. The first group of returning exiles set out from Babylon in 538 B.C. The second group, probably much larger, left in 520 B.C. under Zerubbabel as civil governor and Joshua as high priest with plans for rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem. By 515 B.C. the new structure was dedicated and regular worship and sacrifices were resumed. In 445 B.C. Nehemiah was named governor and went back with purpose of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, repopulating the city by gathering people from the countryside, and reforming the Temple worship: Kinsler & Kinsler, *Jubilee*, 71. The priest and scribe Ezra returned with the task of establishing at which the Law was proclaimed by Ezra. What he read that day many have been the then-completed Pentateuch or the Holiness Code portion in Leviticus: Kinsler & Kinsler, *Jubilee*, 17-26.

⁴¹ James Halteman, *The Clashing Worlds of Economics and Faith* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1995), 39,41

⁴² Wallis, *Souls*, 178.

poor and homeless that are forgotten. “The Hebrew words for poor are *ani*, *anaw*, *ebyon*, *dal* and *ras*. *Ani* (and *anaw*) denotes one who is “wrongfully impoverished or dispossessed.” *Ebyon* refers to a beggar imploring charity. *Dal* connotes a thin, weakly person, that is, an impoverished, deprived peasant. *Ras* is a neutral term. In their persistent polemic against the oppression of the poor, the prophets used terms *ebyon*, *ani* and *dal*.”⁴³

There are numerous texts on the victims of poverty due to the sins of others. From the O.T. Legal traditions, the Book of the Covenant, the Deuteronomic Law Code the Holiness Code, the Prophetic tradition (Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah), the Later Prophets (Jeremiah and Second Isaiah), the Psalter, Wisdom Literature, and in the Intertestament period and Jewish apocrypha, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Qumran Community and down to the Rabbinic Literature and Jesus, there are hundreds of texts that present God as the defender of the poor who indicts those who exploit and abuse the poor, and who commands the faithful to fulfill basic human needs for all and work toward the welfare of one’s neighbor.⁴⁴ The O.T. frequently indicates widows and orphans as the most poor:

In common Greek usage, the word ‘widow,’ *Chera*, is derived from a root meaning ‘forsaken,’ and thus it may refer to any woman living without a husband. In the O.T. the fate of the widow is bewailed. (Ex. 22:25) Widowhood may indeed be a divine penalty. (Ex. 22:22ff) Widows are associated with others who are disadvantaged, e.g., orphans, aliens, or day laborers. They suffer wrongs (Is. 10:2) or loss of rights. (Is. 1:23) They are held in low esteem. (Is. 54:4)⁴⁵ In every code except the Hebrew, the widow has rights of inheritance but in Hebrew law she is completely ignored. One reason for this strange neglect may be the Hebrew belief that death before old age was a calamity, a judgment for sin which was extended to the wife that was left. It was therefore a disgrace to be a widow. (Ruth 1:20-21; Is. 54:4)⁴⁶ A widow in Palestine society was an outcast. She had no inheritance rights for her husband’s property. When the husband died, the oldest son acquired the property. If there was not son, a brother of the deceased husband might marry the widow. If the brother refused or there was none, she would return to her father’s house or to begging. Widows, like other women, had no role in public or religious life. They often wore black clothing to signal their plight. Moreover, the rich often oppressed them.⁴⁷

The care of the orphans, fatherless (in Hebrew *yatom*; Greek *orphanos*) was from the earliest times a concern of the Israelites. (Ex. 22:22) The Deuteronomic Code was most solicitous for the welfare of such (Deut. 16:11; 14: 24:17), protecting their rights.⁴⁸ The word “fatherless” seems to be equated with “orphan.” Hebrew law carefully provided for fatherless children with special tithes at the end of every three-year period and the requirement that gleanings be left in the fields for them. (Deut. 14:29; 24:19-21; 26:12;

⁴³ Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1997), 41.

⁴⁴ Walter E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 21-38. Luther recognized this when he wrote: “We should fear and love God, and so we should not seek by craftiness to gain possession of our neighbor’s inheritance or home, nor to obtain them under pretext of legal rights, but be of service and help him so that he may keep what is his.” Pilgrim, *Good News* 21.

⁴⁵ “Widow,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friederich, Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1985), 1313.

⁴⁶ Otto J. Baab, “Widow,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 842.

⁴⁷ Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2003), 117.

⁴⁸ “Orphan” in *New Bible Dictionary*, Second Edition, org. ed. J.D. Douglas (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. 1982), 863.

27:19) The plea to care for the fatherless is frequent. (Ex. 22:22; Deut. 10:18; 24:17; Is. 1:17; 10:2; Jer. 22:3; Zech. 7:10) The fatherless child is often associated with the widow in the biblical pleas for compassion be shown for the needy.⁴⁹

Perhaps in some instances the fatherless was a daughter rather than a son, although this cannot be proved. The daughter inherited from her father only in the absence of sons. (Num. 27:7-11) Thus the fatherless daughters required special consideration in the Israelite community. It has been suggested that the 'fatherless' were the female children of sacred prostitutes, who obviously had no identifiable father. Their life was integrated with the sanctuary or temple and would have been seriously disrupted by the Josianic reform in 621. These cult children were sometimes adopted by barren women who thus reduced the surplus of children of the gods at the shrine (see Hos. 1 for symbolic name).⁵⁰

Since Israel's history appears to be a history of wars from the time of Exodus up to today's Palestinians, either Israel invades and occupies others or vice versa. Many references to widows and orphans in the O.T. can be seen as the consequence of these many wars. A few examples: Israel had a number of wars on the way to the Promised Land over a period of forty years, and many wars with people in different region of Canaan when Israelites tried to occupy the land. Wars with Assyria and Babylon resulted in Israel's defeat and exile. In the time of the Judges one of the wars was one between the Israelites and the Benjaminites (Judg. 20:1-21:25), which killed tens of thousands of men on both sides and nearly wiped out the entire tribe of Benjamin. All these wars left many widows and orphans in Israel. They represent the most poor in Israel society then. No wonder there are so many injunctions in the O.T. to look after the widows and orphans:

The stern condemnation voiced by the prophets and other writers against injustice include attacks upon the mistreatment of widows. (Is. 1:23c; 10:2; cf.: Job 22:9, 24:3, 31:16; Ps. 94:6) In the Day of Judgment God will take swift action against those who oppress hired laborers, and the widow and the orphan. (Mal. 3:5) The prominence of these strong words of denunciation abundantly testifies to the prevalence of the oppressive treatment of the widow in biblical society. 'Widow' in Hebrew resembles the word meaning 'to be mute,' suggesting the muteness induced by disgraceful widowhood. Her plight may have been aggravated by the possibility that she wore identifying garments. (Gen. 38:14, 19) The biblical concern for the widow is evidence that she needed compassion because of her inferior position in the community. As a member of the covenant community the widow must receive the same merciful treatment as that which is given to the sojourner and the fatherless (Deut. 14:29), her garment must not be taken in pledge (Deut. 24:17, cf.; Amos 2:8), because she may own only one. The process of gathering grain and grapes should take into account the hunger of the widow and leave some of the harvest for gleaning purposes. (Deut. 24:19-21) The Levites, the sojourner, and the fatherless, and the widow are to be given the tithe of the produce in the third year. (Deut. 26:12, cf.; 27:19). . . . God is declared to be the "father of the fatherless and protector of widows" (Ps. 68:5).⁵¹

⁴⁹ Otto J. Baab, "Fatherless," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 245.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 246. The consequence of wars in modern history will help us understand why there were so many widows and orphans in Israel's society: For instance, in the Gulf war, as of May 2002, the Veterans Administration reported that nearly 9000 soldiers had died. Johnson, *Sorrows of Empire*, 100. In the recent Iraq war over 2,000 U.S. soldiers and over 100,000 Iraqis have died, CNN Report. In the Korean war, 36,913 American soldiers, 900,000 Chinese soldiers, along with three million Korean people perished. How many widows and orphans have these three wars produced?

⁵¹ Baab, *Widow*, 842. According to Baab, "The term for 'widow' is applied to the city of Babylon. To her will come both widowhood and loss of children (Is. 47:9), i.e., loss of her population. Desolated Israel is

b. The Gentiles Slaves (Hagar, Foreign Women and Children)

Hagar (Gen. 16:1-4, 8, 15-16; 21:9, 14, 17; 25:12)

Scholars suspect that Hagar was part of the property Abraham received from the king of Egypt in exchange for Sarah (Gen. 12:16), and later interpreters speculate that Hagar is Pharaoh's own daughter.⁵² If so, leaving her own home, father's palace, royal family, relative and friends and coming to a foreign country as a slave, an outsider, a property with no right, Hagar was homeless to begin with.

The opening episodes, located in Canaan, highlight Sarah as she deals with Hagar and Abraham. The closing ones, located in the wilderness, feature Hagar encountering the deity. The structural and content parallels between the scenes highlight their differences. For Hagar, the plot of the first story is circular, moving from bondage to flight to bondage, while the action of the second is linear, proceeding from bondage to expulsion to homelessness. Sarai the Hebrew is married, rich, and free; she is also old and barren. Hagar the Egyptian is single, poor, and bonded; she is also young and fertile. Power belongs to Sarai, the subject of action; powerlessness marks Hagar, the object.⁵³

Early in the text motherhood is an important issue. For Hagar, motherhood will be a coerced experience involving the violation of her body over which she, as a slave, has no control. The text reports that after Abraham lived in the land of Canaan for ten years, Sarai, "took Hagar her Egyptian slave-girl and gave her to Abram as his wife. He went to Hagar and she conceived" (Gen. 16:2-4a). From Sarai's position motherhood is a privilege that will grant her status, for in her world of the ancient Near East a barren woman lost status. While Hagar had no choices in matters of forced motherhood, the law provided options for wealthy women like Sarai who were barren.⁵⁴ In Gen. 16:4b, when she saw that she had conceived, she "looked with contempt" on her mistress. Hagar acquires a new vision of Sarai. Hierarchical blinders disappear. The exalted mistress decreases while the lowly maid increases. A reordering of the relationship is the point. By giving her to Abram for a wife, Sarai hoped to be built up. In fact, however, Sarai enhanced the status of the servant to become herself correspondingly lowered in the eyes of Hagar. This unexpected twist provides an occasion for mutuality and equality between two females, but it is not to be. If Hagar experienced new vision, Sarai remains within the old structures.⁵⁵

to be of good cheer and to forget the 'reproach of (her) widowhood' (Is.54:4a). Sad at heart, one poet says that Jerusalem sits lonely; she has become like a widow (Lam. 1:1). Another cries out: 'Our mothers are like widows,' and then mentions poverty and servitude as proof of this" (Lam. 5:3-4).

⁵² Danna Nolan Fewell, "Commentary on Ezra and Nehemiah," in *Global Bible Commentary*, gen. ed. Daniel Patte (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 130.

⁵³ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 10.

⁵⁴ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll: Orbis books, 1993), 16. Hagar's running away is also seen as, "Hagar having liberated herself from oppressive power structures." Though the law prescribes harsh punishment for run-away slaves, she takes the risk rather than endure more brutal treatment by Sarai, 19. Trible sees Hagar's running away to wilderness as a liberation. "This runaway pregnant maid has fled from the house of bondage to the wilderness. For her it is a hospitable place, symbolized by a spring on the way to Shur, a region at the Egyptian border. There, with water to nourish life, Hagar is almost home." Trible, *Terror*, 14.

⁵⁵ Trible, *Terror*, 12.

Sarah exercised her power over Hagar and began to abuse her. The abuse must have been so unbearable that Hagar ran away into the wilderness without any place to go. Williams interprets, “The harshness of the force Sarai exerts upon Hagar is indicated in the passage by the verb (*’nh*), which is also used in Exodus to indicate the suffering experience of all the Hebrews when they were slaves in Egypt.”⁵⁶

The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, “Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” She said, “I am running away from my mistress, Sarai.” The angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress, and submit to her. I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude. . . . Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the LORD has given heed to your affliction. He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin” (Gen. 16:6-11).

Hagar does not call upon the name of the deity, *qr’bsm yhw*. (Gen. 12:8; 13:4) Instead she calls the name *qr’sm-yhwy*, a power attributed to no one else in the Bible. The maid after receiving a divine announcement of the forthcoming birth, sees, *r’h*, God with new vision. . . . Her naming unites the divine and human encounter.⁵⁷ The angel’s, Yahweh’s, solution for Hagar is to return to her abusive mistress troubles many scholars. It troubles Tribble who argues.

These two imperatives, return and submit to suffering, bring a divine word of terror to an abused. They also strike at the heart of Exodus faith. Inexplicably, the God who later, seeing (*r’h*) the suffering (*’oni*) of a slave people, come down to deliver them *out of the hand* of the Egyptians (Ex. 3:7-8) here identifies with the oppressor and orders a servant to return not only to bondage but also to affliction. Thus, the ambiguity present at the beginning of this episode finds its resolution in the approval of affliction. . . . Hagar’s flight is futile.⁵⁸

It troubles Fewell who raises the serious question, “If the voice to ‘return’ to

⁵⁶ Williams, *Sisters*, 19.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 23. With regard to *El Roi* Hagar used for God, Helmer Ringgren indicates that El familiar is the highest god of the Canaanites (as of most of the Semitic peoples). . . . These names (i.e., those compounded with El) are never associated with the patriarchs, either as individuals or as tribes; instead, with the exception of El Shaddai, they are always linked to specific cultic sites El olam, ‘the Everlasting God,’ appears in Genesis 21:33 in connection with Beer-sheba. El ro’i, ‘God of seeing,’ appears in Genesis 16:13 at another sanctuary in southern Palestine. Beyond this we have no information about these two divinities. Viewed within the context of Hagar’s Egyptian heritage, this act of naming the deity takes on added significance. Though El may also be, as Roland de Vaux contends, an altered form of ‘Baal’ in the text “under the influence of yahwism, the name of Hagar’s God (pointing to sight and therefore eyes of the deity) recalls certain Egyptian myths associated with the God Ra, his eye and the creation of humans.” Williams. *Sisters*, 23-24.

⁵⁸ Tribble, *Terror*, 16. “For her unborn child signifies not just comfort but also suffering. The divine promise of Ishmael means life at the boundary of consolation and desolation. . . . Ishmael is to be a wanderer and loner, in strife even with his own people. . . . Responding to these ambivalent promises from the heavenly messenger, Hagar “calls the name of Yahweh who has spoken to her” (Gen.16:13a). Hagar does not call *upon* the name of the deity. (*qr’bsm yhw*; cf. Gen. 12:8; 13:4) Instead, she calls the name (*qr’ sm-yhw*) a power attributed to no one else in all the Bible. She calls the name of Yahweh, “You are a God of seeing” (16:13a). Her naming unites the divine and human encounter; the God who sees and the God who is seen. Tribble, *Terror*, 18.

Sarah is really God's." She argues that, "God tells her to go back," needs to be interrupted to ask questions, "Did God really tell her to go back or is it her own voice as with many of today's women's voices 'to go back' because they have no other place to go and no other way to survive?"⁵⁹

Another way to understand God's command for Hagar to return to Sarah is this: What God wants is that she and the child should be saved, and at the moment, the only way to accomplish that is not in the desert, but by returning to the house of Abraham. Ishmael hasn't been born. Hagar simply must wait a little longer, because Ishmael must be born in the house of Abraham to prove that he is the first-born (Deut. 21:15-17) and to enter into the household through the rite of circumcision. (Chap. 17) This will guarantee him participation in the history of salvation and will give him rights of inheritance in the house of Abraham.⁶⁰

Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael. (16:15-16) "The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age; Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him" (Gen. 21:1-3).

Sarah enjoys power greater than ever because she has born a son. As the life of the mistress has prospered, the lot of the servant woman has worsened. Sarah the matriarch wants to protect the life of her own son by chasing out (*grs*) Hagar the slave. (16:6b) The deity confirms Sarah's order. (21:12b) To protect the life of her own child, Sarah commands Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman and her son" (21:10a).⁶¹

Economic realities, specifically inheritance, are the central issue here. Hagar is poor; and Sarah does not want Hagar's station elevated, as it no doubt would be if Ishmael received the inheritance from his father that the firstborn son was supposed to receive. "So early next morning, Abraham took some bread and a skin of water and giving them to Hagar, put the child on her shoulder and sent her away" (Gen. 21:14). At this point in the narrative, the issue of economic realities connects with the issue of homelessness. Abraham has given Hagar and his son no economic resources to sustain them in their life away from his family. Hagar and Ishmael seem consigned to a future of poverty and homelessness. Bread and a skin of water would not sustain them on their journey, which apparently had no destination. The text claims, "She wandered off into the desert of Beersheba. When the skin of water

⁵⁹ Fewell, *Children*, 43-53. Fewell takes issue with the story that God told Hagar to go back and submit to her abusive mistress. In such a case, Fewell suggests, we interrupt the text; "To interrupt means to question the story being told, to imagine the story being told differently, and likewise, to question one's life and to imagine life being lived differently. In the language of Peter Brooks, 'The reader is solicited not only to understand the story but to complete it; to make it fuller, richer, more powerfully ordered and therefore more hermeneutic.' In other words, there are some stories we are called upon to imitate; there are many others we are called to upon to complete and, in the living of our lives, there are some we are called upon to retell, some we are called upon to rewrite, if they are to mean anything significant to us in today's world." Fewell. *Children*, 34-35.

⁶⁰ Williams, *Sisters*, 21. Fewell connects the story of Abraham's sending away Hagar and her son to the justification to dismiss the foreign wives and their children. The question of the ethnic origin of Sarah remains open. Finally, according to the Genesis narrative (25:1-6), Abraham also sent away the children of his third wife, Keturah. This text, too, would support the Ezra-Nehemiah reform. Fewell, "*Ezra and Nehemiah*," 130.

⁶¹ Tribble, *Terror*, 21-22.

was finished she abandoned the child under a bush. Then she went and sat down at a distance, thinking ‘I cannot bear to see the child die.’ She began to sob” (Gen. 21:15-16).⁶² Departing her land of bondage, Hagar knows not exodus but exile. She wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba. (21:14) In reference to physical movement, the verb “wander” (*t’h*) connotes uncertainty, lack or loss of direction, and even destitution. In fact, unlike the region of Shur, the territory of Beersheba provides no water at all. Furthermore, it does not border Egypt. Receiving Hagar in forest exile rather than voluntary flight, this wilderness is an arid and alien place. It offers a deathbed for the child. And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, ‘What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.’ Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. (Gen. 21: 17-19) The text says God heard the voice of the boy. From ancient times, however, translators have robbed this woman of her grief by changing the unambiguous female verb forms to masculine constructions. Such alterations make the child lift up his voice and weep. But masculine emendations cannot silence Hagar. A host of feminine verb forms throughout this section witness to her tears; she departed and she wandered in the wilderness; she found a place for the child to die; she kept a vigil; and she uttered the dread phrase, “the death of the child.” Hagar weeps.⁶³

When God sees and hears heart-piercing grief facing imminent death of her child, God guides her to a well, which revives the dying child and the mother; renewing God’s blessing to make him a great nation.

Brueggemann comments, “The Ishmael’s presence asserts that God has not exclusively committed himself to Abraham-Sarah. God’s concern is not confined to the elect line. There is passion and concern for the troubled ones who stand outside that line.”⁶⁴ Meeks agrees, “God’s own economic work begins with those who have been excluded from the household.”⁶⁵

⁶² Williams, *Sisters*, 29.

⁶³ Tribble, *Terror*, 23-24.

⁶⁴ Brueggemann, *Commentary on Genesis*, 152-153.

⁶⁵ Meeks, *The Economist*, 43.

According to Deen, “Hagar (Gen. 16:1-4, 8, 15-16; 21:9, 14, 17; 25:12) became the mother, through Abraham of Ishmael, from which came the tribe of Ishmaelites, who were nomads of northern Arabia. One tradition centers around Hagar and Mecca and the holy well of *Zem-Zem*, in the sacred area surrounding the Kaaba, or holy building. In the cornerstone here is said to be the original Koran of the Mohammedans. At this well Hagar and her son were supposed to have quenched their thirst. From the Arab of the Hagar-Abraham line, Mohammed was descended, say Mohammedans. The strength of Islam, still mightily on three continents, is said to be bound up with the name of Hagar. Edith Deen, *All of the Women of the Bible* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1955), 264, 266.

Tribble contends, “Ishmael prospers. For him the wilderness becomes home and provides work. The choice of a wife for Ishmael highlights tension in Hagar’s story. Having at first promised her innumerable descendants (16:20), God altered and transferred that promise to Abraham” (21:13). In her last act, Hagar guarantees that these descendants will be Egyptians. Thus the mother suggests for herself a future that God has diminished. Tribble. *Terror*, 27. Tribble names Hagar “a pivotal figure in biblical theology. She is the first person in Scripture whom a divine messenger visits and the only person who dares to name the deity. Within the historical memories of Israel, she is the first woman to bear a child. This conception and birth make her an extraordinary figure in the story of faith: the first woman to hear an annunciation, the only one to receive a divine promise of descendants, and the first to weep for her dying child. Truly, Hagar the Egyptian is the prototype of not only special but all mothers in Israel.” Tribble, *Terror*, 28.

Trible offers a succinct conclusion of Hagar's story: It yields an abundance of hermeneutical reflections. In many and varied ways, Hagar shapes and challenges faith. Read in light of contemporary issues and images, her story depicts oppression in three familiar forms: nationality, class, and sex. Hagar, the Egyptian, is a maid; Sarah the Hebrew is her mistress. Hagar is powerless because God supports Sarah. Kept in her place, the slave woman is the innocent victim of use, abuse, and rejection.

As a symbol of the oppressed, Hagar becomes many things to many people. Most specifically, all sorts of rejected women find their stories in her. She is the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal resource, the other woman, the runaway youth, the religious fleeing from affliction, the pregnant young woman alone, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, the shopping bag lady carrying bread and water, the homeless woman, the indigent relying upon handouts from the power structure, the welfare mother, and the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others.⁶⁶

Hagar foreshadows Israel's pilgrimage of faith through contrasts. As a maid in bondage, she flees from suffering. Yet she experiences exodus without liberation, revelation without salvation, wilderness without covenant, wanderings without land, promise without fulfillment, and unmerited exile without return. This Egyptian slave woman is stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted for the transgressions of Israel. She is bruised for the iniquities of Sarah and Abraham; upon her is the chastisement that makes them whole. Hagar is Israel, from exodus to exile, yet with differences. And these differences yield terror. All we who are heirs of Sarah and Abraham, by flesh and spirit, must answer for the terror in Hagar's story. To neglect the theological challenge she presents is to falsify faith.⁶⁷

The Christian churches are often ambiguous in treating the Hagers of our society or treat them as Abraham and Sarah treated Hagar in their days. Many Hagers in our contemporary society are too used, exploited and abused and blamed for the victimization they experience.

Foreign Women and Children

There were many gentiles who were discriminated against in the land of Israel, an example taken from Ezra 9:1b-4, 10-14; 10: 11,14-19, 44 and Nehemiah 13:1-3, 23-27 indicates the eviction of foreign women and children into homelessness just because they were Gentiles from Israel who married Israelites and bore children.

The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness

⁶⁶ Tribble. *Terror*, 28.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

the officials and leaders have led the way. . . . They pledged themselves to send away their wives. (Ezra 9:1-2, 19)

General historical context of the text goes like this:

After Cyrus and the Persians conquered Babylon in 539 B.C.E., the king issued a decree that commanded the Jews, who had been exiled in 597 and 586, to return home and rebuild the Temple. . . . The Temple was dedicated in 516 B.C.E. . . . About fifty-eight years later, Artaxerxes I (465–424) sent Ezra, the priest and scribe of the law of the God of heaven, to Jerusalem. Within his first year Ezra led the people in a public confession of sin because of their intermarriage with foreigners and saw the creation of a commission that carried out the removal of the foreign wives and their children.⁶⁸

Interpretations of who these women are and why they are sent away vary: The NRSV and the NEB interpret them as “the peoples of the lands” and in Ezra 10:3 (9:1) as “foreigners”—namely, the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the land. The accusation of “abominations” (9:1) (cf. vv.11, 14) may suggest that they worshiped other gods (cf. Neh. 13:26-27), practiced sexual immorality, or followed a detestable diet.⁶⁹

Willa Mathis Johnson (1999), exploring how Persian marriage practices play into Persian politics of land control, pushes the hypergamy theory further and argues that the “foreign women” were women from Persian noble families who were given, along with access to Persian controlled land in Palestine, to some of the men of Judah who were in positions of leadership. Heard (2001) sees that Mesopotamian wives would have been perceived as more geographically and politically connected to the Persian government and thus not the same kind of threat to ethnic identity as the “people of the land.” While issues of religious identity and the danger of apostasy were the explicit cause of the divorces in Ezra 9-10, scholars suspect that there may have been other, more covert reasons for this controversy. “Daniel Smith-Christopher (1991), using the sociological theory of hypergamy, argues that the men involved were attempting to “marry up” on the social ladder. He supposes that the “foreign women” were not ethnically foreign at all, but were Jewish women who had not been in exile. He follows Williamson (1985) who argues that “people of the land,” i.e., the surrounding community that had remained in the land, controlled much of the territory and enjoyed economic and social advantages that the returned exiles did not share.”⁷⁰

Kenneth Hoglund notes that political factors may have played a role in the criticism of foreign marriages. If the purpose of the Persian’s sending Ezra and Nehemiah was to enhance their control over Yehud and neighboring territories, then it was crucial to define who was part of the assembly of the exiles and who was not. Right of access to the land was not based on past land allotment systems, but the exiles were allowed to dwell in their homeland at the dispensation of the Persian Empire. If a province like Yehud was in a perilous condition, it would become important to know who could function in it and

⁶⁸ Ralph W. Klein, “Ezra & Nehemiah: Historical Background” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume II*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 666. The order of the canonical texts suggests that Ezra came before Nehemiah.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 732-733.

⁷⁰ Fewell, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 129. Fewell claims that many of the books of the Hebrew Bible were written in the first part of the Persian period (ca 538-332 B.C.E.), that is the time of Ezra (who launched his reform against mixed marriage ca 457/458 B.C.E.) and Nehemiah (governor of Judah ca 445-433 B.C.E.) In her view, Genesis was also probably written during this period.

who could not, and the empire would take action to control issues of assimilation. Intermarriage under these circumstances might threaten the future of the Persian-authorized community in Yehud. The exiles might lose their land if they did not maintain themselves as a distinct community.⁷¹

Eskenazi and Judd (1994) suggest that an imbalance in the ratio of women to men may have been part of the initial problem for the returnees. Returnees married women who stayed in the land of Israel during the exile. This might suggest that at some point, the number of returning women increased to an adequate proportion. The issue of marriages with the “women of the land,” which Ezra presents as a religious issue, an issue of purity, also had a social and economic dimension that recent studies have investigated.⁷²

Jonathan was the only one who spoke up in Ezra 10:15, saying, “The truth is that you are disrupting—no, worse, destroying lives with this new edict. You are tearing families apart. You are leaving women and children homeless with no place to go and no way to take care of themselves.”⁷³ It is always a minority that opposes injustice imposed on innocent and harmless and helpless people.

This is another story of eviction and abandonment. Regardless of who they are—Jew or Gentile—the policy to send women and children back to their countries without their husband or fathers, without anyone to support them, is throwing them into devastating poverty and homelessness. Israel had just experienced that the injustice they had practiced sent them into exile. Now as they return from long years of exile they repeat the same injustice by breaking up families according to race and abandoning women and children into exile, homelessness.

So God commanded, “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt... If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans”(Ex. 22:21-22).

c) Abused Children and Women (Daughter of Jephtha & Levite’s Wife) Jephthah’s Daughter (Judges.11: 1 - 40)

This story of Jephthah’s daughter belongs to the days of the judges. In the eleventh century, when Ammon becomes a kingdom in Transjordan with Rabbah as its capital city, that nation begins to oppress the children of Israel, specifically those living in the territory of Gilead with Mizpah as their principal city. For the Deuteronomic theologians, whose judgment prefaces the Jephthah cycle, this military threat is the work of the LORD, God is punishing Israel for its apostasy. (Judg. 10:6-16) After confessing their sins, the children of Israel seek a deliverer, one to lead the fight against the Ammonites. (Judg. 10:17-18)⁷⁴

⁷¹ Klein, *Ezra & Nehemiah: Historical*, 746-747.

⁷² Fewell, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 129.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 93-94.

In the early part of Jephthah's life, because of his illegitimacy, he had been banished from his father's house and had taken up his residence in Tob, not far from Gilead. Here he became head of a warring tribe of freebooters who went raiding with him. When war broke out between the Ammonites and the Gileadites, the latter sought Jephthah as their commander. He consented only after a solemn covenant, ratified on both sides at Mizpeh, a strongly fortified frontier town of Gilead. There he established his residence temporarily and brought his daughter. Jephthah was the son of a distinguished Hebrew named Gilead, who lived in territory of that name. His mother was a stranger to the tribe, an inferior woman described as a harlot. (Judg. 11:1-2) Despite his mother's foreign blood Jephthah became a great commander and a believer in the one God.⁷⁵

In his perplexity to give fresh courage to his troops and to sustain his own confidence against such fearful odds, he made a vow publicly to the LORD, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes to meet me, when I returned victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the LORD's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering" (Judg. 11:30b-31).

Deen describes the welcoming scene:

The women and maiden had assembled to greet this victorious warrior with songs and dances. Who should be the first to come out from Jephthah's own doorway but his beloved daughter! Maybe not until this moment had he stopped to realize how rash and cruel had been his vow. But now his shock was great and his distress poignant as he looked and saw his beautiful daughter standing there in front of his own doorway. She ran to embrace him. He had been all in all to her. Born in exile, reared amid the wild scenes of desert life, she had known no other protection but her father's tent, no greater love than his. (Judges 11:35)⁷⁶

When he does see her, Jephthah rents his clothes. (Judg. 11:35a) It is a gesture of despair, grief, and mourning. "Ah, my daughter!" to be followed, however, by strong words of accusation, "You have brought me low (*kr*); you have become my calamity" (11:35b). Repeatedly, Jephthah's language triumphs; blame overwhelms the victim. At the moment of recognition and disclosure, Jephthah thinks of himself and indicts his daughter for the predicament. "I" (*anoki*), he continues, "have opened my mouth to Yahweh, and I cannot turn back" (11:35c). Faithfulness to an unfaithful vow has condemned its victim. Although his daughter has served him devotedly with music and dance, Jephthah bewails the calamity that she brings upon him. And throughout it all God

⁷⁵ Edith Deen, *All of the women of the Bible* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1955), 75. Jephthah grew up in Gilead—a place across the River, a place that is part of Israel and yet not part of Israel. He grew up during a time when the people among whom he lived had turned away from the face of their God. They turned away from God's face in the same way they turned away from the faces of their children. Jephthah's mother, more than likely once a damaged child herself, had been forced to become a prostitute. It was the only way she could take care of herself, and then later, of her son. No man took responsibility for him. With no father to claim him, he had no property and no hope of inheritance. He and his mother lived in poverty. He was a nobody. He learned to take care of himself. He grew up tough and had learned to fight his way. He wasn't afraid of anything because he had nothing to lose. People in Gilead were afraid of him. The very men who engaged the prostitute then turned the prostitute's son into an outcast. The whole town sired him and neglected him. They kicked him out of the community. Fewell, *Children*, 70.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 76.

says nothing. His daughter responds, “My father, if you opened your mouth to Yahweh, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the LORD has given you vengeance against your enemies, the Ammorites. . . . Let this thing be done for me: Grant me two months, so that I may go and wander on the mountains, and bewail my virginity, my companions and I.” “Go,” he said and sent her away for two months. (Judg. 11:36-37)⁷⁷

The request is for a respite, a time and place apart from her father and his vow. That time is to be filled with lamentation, not for death, but for unfulfilled life This particular death defies all the categories of the natural and the expected. First, it is premature; life ends before its potential has unfolded. Second, her death is to be violent. Death by fire is bitter death, and bitterer still when its author is her very own father. Third, her death will leave no heirs because she is a virgin. What alone designated fulfillment for every Hebrew woman, the bearing of children, will never be hers to know. (cf. I Sam.1:1-20) Truly, with no child to succeed her, she may be numbered among the unremembered, those “who have perished as though they had not lived.” Premature, violent, without an heir: all the marks of unnatural death befalls this young woman, and here is premeditated death, a sentence of murder passed upon an innocent victim because of the faithless vow uttered by her foolish father. . . . “I (*anoki*) and my female friends;” at the time of deepest sorrow, the last days of her life, the girl reaches out to other women. She chooses them to go with her to wander upon the hills and lament her virginity. In communion with her own kind, she transcends the distance between daughter and father. After this reference to female friends, she speaks no more. Within the limits of the inevitable she has shaped meaning for herself. Her father grants the request, “Go.” So he sent her away for two months. In the company of other women who acknowledge her tragedy, she is neither alone nor isolated. At the end of two months, the daughter returns to the father. (11:39a) He did to her his vow which he had vowed. (11:39b)⁷⁸

Four days every year the daughters of Israel would go out to lament the daughter of Jephthah. (Judg. 11:40) “The unnamed virgin child becomes a tradition in Israel because the women with whom she chose to spend her last days have not let her pass into oblivion. They have established a testimony: activities of mourning reiterated yearly in a special place. This they have done in remembrance of her” (cf. I Cor.11:24-25).⁷⁹

Throughout the centuries patriarchal hermeneutics has forgotten the daughter of Jephthah but remembered her father, exalted him as an exemplary judge. (Judg.. 12:7; I Sam.12:11; Sirach 46:11-12; Heb.11:32-34) But readers, like the daughters of Israel, we remember and mourn the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite. In her death, we are all diminished; by our memory she is forever hallowed.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Tribble. *Terror*, 101-103. In the Near East there was a custom of offering a human as a burnt offering. In 2 Kings 3:27, when the battle was going against him, the king of Moab took his firstborn son and offered him as a burnt offering. Other people sacrificed their sons and daughters as burnt offerings. (Lev. 18:21; 20:2; Deut. 18:10) Micah 6:7 denounces human offering. Jephtha’s offering of his daughter is the same kind of sacrifice. (Judg..11:29-40) God denounced and judged this as a practice of worshiping pagan gods.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 103-105. Tribble compares this story with Abraham and Isaac. In the story of the daughter of Jephthah, no angel intervenes to save the child. The father carries out the human vow precisely as he spoke it; neither God nor man nor woman negates it. Though the son (Isaac) was saved, the daughter is slain. Under the power of the vow, the daughter has breathed her last. My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?, 106.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 107.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 108.

This is another homeless woman who never came home but instead found home in the hearts and souls of the many other women who share her pain and grief for the loss of their lives, and mourn for her and with her.

Levite's Wife/ Concubine (Judg. 19:1-30, 20:1-21:16)

“In Israelite society, a concubine was a slave girl who belonged to a Hebrew family and bore children. Concubines were acquired by purchase from poor Hebrew families, captured in war, or taken in payment of debt. A girl in this classification achieved a certain status if she had sons” (Gen. 21:10; 22:24; 30:3; 31:33; Ex. 23:12; 21:7, 10).⁸¹

“A certain Levite, residing in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. But his concubine became angry with him, and she went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there some four months. Then her husband set out after her, to speak tenderly to her and bring her back” (Judg 19:1b-3a). The Levite's speaking to the heart of his concubine would indicate his love for her. He seeks reconciliation.

Because of his father-in-law's hospitality he stayed there for four days and on the fifth night, “He got up and departed, and arrived opposite Jebus (Jerusalem). When they were near Gibeah, which belongs to Benjamin, he went in and sat down in the open square of the city, but no one took them in to spend the night. When the old man saw him he brought him into his house, and offered him hospitality” (19:4-21).

While they were enjoying themselves, the men of the city, a perverse lot, surrounded the house, and started pounding on the door. They said to the old man, the master of the house, “Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may have intercourse with him.” And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, “No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Since this man is my guest, do not do this vile thing. Here are my virgin daughter and my concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do whatever you want to them; but against this man do not do such a vile thing.” But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine, and put her out to them. They wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go. As morning appeared, the woman came and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was, until it was light. (Judg. 19:22-26)

As the story unfolds, the old man offered an alternative. To counterbalance a prohibition he grants permission. Two female objects he offers to protect a male from a group of wicked “brothers.” One of these women is bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh, his very own daughter. The other belongs to his guest. Both are expendable to the demands of wicked men. He gives wicked men a license to rape them.⁸²

The rules of hospitality in Israel protected only males. The Levite, the overnight guest, seized (*hzq*) his concubine and pushed her outside to them (Judg. 19:25b). The one who

⁸¹ Otto J. Baab, “Concubine,” in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 666.

⁸² Tribble. *Terror*, 74.

was seeking out his concubine to speak tenderly to her then turns her over to the enemy to save himself. The woman is betrayed into the hands of sinners. (cf. Mark 14:41) No one within the house comes to her aid. They raped her and tortured her all night until the morning. (Judg. 19:25d) The crime was not a single deed but rather multiple acts of violence.⁸³

In the morning her master got up, opened the doors of the house, and when he went out to go on his way, there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold. The Levite tells her, "Get up, we are going." But there was no answer. Then he put her on the donkey; and the man set out for his home. When he had entered his house, he took a knife, and grasping his concubine he cut her into twelve pieces, limb by limb, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. Then he commanded the men whom he sent, saying, "Thus shall you say to all the Israelites, 'Has such a thing ever happened a since the

day that the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until this day? Consider it, take counsel, and speak out,' (Judg. 19:27-30).

From the original Hebrew language and the culture of the day, Kang exegetes the text differently than it has been in the past, claiming that the text has been misinterpreted and people have perceived her as an unfaithful prostitute who betrayed her husband, and, therefore, we must now correct the misreading of the text. Kang argues:

Originally she was not a concubine. The Levite took her as his wife but treated her like a concubine. In the context of the usage of terms "husband," "son-in-law," "father-in-law," "wife" and alternating the use of "wife" and "concubine" for her, she was wife, not a concubine. The original Hebrew Bible writes, "She prostituted on top of him," which gives the impression that he made her do an abnormal sexual activity. The woman was not a grown woman but a young teenager. (age 13-15) In the original Hebrew Bible there is no record of her being unchaste. She is so young that his abnormal sexual activity could have scared her and she went away to her father's house. And he went there "to speak to her heart," which connotes that she did not do anything wrong. Otherwise he would use language such as, "I will forgive you," but instead, the nuance of the text indicates that he was going to ask her forgiveness and bring her back. Kang suggests the Levite could have been a sexual pervert from his behavior of grasping and pushing her out to other sexual pervers in town of Gibeah to be raped. The word *hazak* gives the impression that she was resisting going out but he grabbed her and threw her out. He did not even ask her how she was when he finds her at the door of the house with her hands on the threshold, and then cutting her up into twelve pieces when he arrived at home, a similar crime committed by contemporary sexual predators.⁸⁴

According to Kang, Judg. 20: 4, "The Levite, the husband of the woman who was murdered," and 20:6b, "They raped my concubine until she died," both indicate she died. In the original Hebrew Bible there is no indication she was dead. The present tense of the participle *nopheleth* indicates she is still alive, simply lying at the door. The proof for her being alive is also from his alternative use of two different words meaning "grasp." In 19:25 and 29, when he grasped her and pushed her out the door, the text uses word *hazak*, which means strong grabbing or seizing; when he cut her up the text also uses *hazak*. But

⁸³ Ibid., 76.

⁸⁴ Kang, *Bible Study*, 158.

in 20:6, when he explains to his people about what happened, he replaces *hazak* with *ahaz*, which is not as strong a grab as *hazak*. It appears that he tries to conceal his cruelty by using *ahaz*. Therefore, Kang suspects that she was still alive when they returned home. To cut up a live person, he needed to grasp her tightly *hazak*. If he was cutting the already-dead body he didn't have to grab it so tightly.⁸⁵

The Levite seems not to show any guilt, regrets, repentance or grief except murderous rage. From all of such behaviors he was a pervert. We can also sense his mood changes from the time he was speaking to her heart to get her back home to the time he grabbed and pushed her out to be raped, and when he cut her up into twelve pieces. No doubt that he was a cruel pervert. How much more can a man be cruel than this? And he tells a lie to his people, "The men of Gibeah intended to kill me and raped my concubine until she died."

Trible laments, "She is property, object, tool, and literary device. Without name, speech, or power, she has no friends to aid her in life or mourn her in death. Passing her back and forth among themselves, the men of Israel have obliterated her totally. Captured, betrayed, raped, tortured, murdered, dismembered, and scattered. Her life is laid down by a man."⁸⁶

The consequence of the disguised presentation of the case to his own people is even more chilling. (Judg. 20:1-21:25) For the killer Levite, murdering one woman was not enough. He instigated further killing by agitating the Israelites to go to war against the Benjaminites and killed tens of thousands of men on both sides and nearly wiped out the entire tribe of Benjamin. (Judg. 20:1-48) The Israelites killed the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead, including the women and the little ones, except four hundred young virgins who had never slept with a man, and brought them to the camp at Shiloh and gave them to the six hundred Benjaminites as their wives, because they had none. The Israelites advised the rest of the two hundred Benjaminite single men to abduct young women of Shiloh who come out to dance for yearly festival of the LORD and the Benjaminites did so. (Judg. 21: 6-23)

Sexual violence is viciously intertwined with patriarchy. Violence against women can be seen as the outgrowth of patriarchal social constructs that define the relationship between women and men as one of subordination and domination. Patriarchy is the complex of ideologies and structures that sustains and perpetuates male control over females. Patriarchy becomes a moral system in which power or control over is the central value not only in male-female relationships but throughout the social and natural order.⁸⁷

The Levite's murdered wife and many other Israelite women and children lost their lives and never came home because of the cruelty of murderous men. The story in Judges 19-21 represents the terrorism against women in those days.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 159.

⁸⁶ Tribble. *Terror*, 80-81.

⁸⁷ Karen L. Bloomquist, "Sexual Violence," in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse*, eds. Joanne Carlson Brown & Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 62.

The first born Egyptian children became a collective scapegoat to illustrate the power of the God of the exodus. When Israelites occupied the land of Canaan they were told to kill everyone including women and little children; the male babies in the Gospel of Matthew were killed to emphasize Jesus' divine status. David and Bathsheba's first baby is sacrificed as God's punishment of David's sin. Job's children are forfeited in a wager between God and the Satan regarding Job's righteousness. In the flood story or Sodom's story, God had responded to human violence with an overwhelming violence of his own in sacrificing innocent children; a violence so devastating that he, like a parent in a fit of uncontrollable rage, having resorted to the physical abuse of a child, comes to regret his action and to swear repeatedly that he will never respond in such a way again. (Gen. 8:21; 9:11, 15)⁸⁸

The Levite's wife represents all women and children in the ancient times who were used as temple prostitutes and child sacrifices, and today who are racially, sexually, socially, economically and politically discriminated against, abused, used, exploited, mutilated and abandoned by men's reckless crimes and by man-made bullets, bombs and rockets. The Levite, a Temple staff person, whose vocation was to serve God, not only forced his wife but also himself and his own people, who killed innocent Benjaminites, and others, into permanent, irrevocable physical, emotional and spiritual homelessness—death.

4) The Root Causes of Homelessness in the O.T.

In those days Prophets spoke the truth and pronounced against Israel's homelessness. The prophet is Israel's single source of insight and guidance and is raised up by Yahweh.⁸⁹ Prophets name several major causes of Israel's death and homelessness: a) betraying God by worshipping idols; b) coveting an extravagant life style; c) exploiting, oppressing and victimizing the poor; d) political and religious corruption; and e) racial, gender class, economic and political discrimination and victimization. There are a multitude of scripture texts in this regard but only a few example texts are presented here.

a) Betraying God—Practicing Idolatry

Jeremiah laments Israel's unfaithfulness to and betrayal of God. "I thought how I would set you among my children, and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful heritage of all the nations. And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me. Instead, as a faithless wife leaves her husband, so you have been faithless to me, O house of Israel, just as a betraying wife who leaves her husband" (Jer. 3:19-20; 6:15).

Ezekiel as a priest saw the nation's idolatrous guilt (8:6-18) and heard God's wrath, "He said to me, 'Mortal, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel are committing here, to drive me far from my sanctuary? Yet you will see still greater abominations,'" (Ezek. 8:6; 8:12). "Therefore, I will act in wrath; my eye will not spare, nor will I have pity; and though they cry in my hearing with a loud voice, I will not listen to them"(Ezek. 8:18). Ezekiel condemns Israel's idol worship as a sexual prostitution (Ezek.23:1-5; Hos.1:2-3; Jer. 13:27) and condemns child sacrifice (16:20; 20:31) as a practice that is inhumane and a distortion of the true worship of God.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Fewell, *Children*, 27, 29.

⁸⁹ Brueggeman, *Land*, 90- 92.

⁹⁰ Newsome, Jr., *Prophets*, 134.

Isaiah gives witness to the idolatry of Israel, “Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands to what their own fingers have made” (Is. 2:8).

b) Exploiting and Oppressing the Poor

Elijah pronounces a death sentence on King Ahab [and Queen Jezebel] for taking Naboth’s vineyard by murdering him (I Kings 21:1-29), “Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, ‘Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel who rules in Samaria; he is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. You shall say to him, “Thus says the LORD: Have you killed, and also taken possession?”’ . . . “In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood” (I Kings 21:17-19).

Jeremiah pronounces a death sentence, the Verdict for Israel’s greed,

“For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly” (Jer.6:13-14). . . . Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages. . . . Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. . . . For shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence . . . King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah . . . with the burial of a donkey he shall be buried—dragged off and thrown out beyond the gates of Jerusalem. (Jer.22:13-19)

Amos’ Verdict:

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy. . . . The time is surely coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks. . . . Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land . . . buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, . . . On that day, says the LORD God, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation. (Amos 4:1-3; 8:4-10)

McAfee Brown notes that Amos punctures his hearers’ complacency by turning his sharp words against the folk in Bethel itself: Unless the Israelites repent, they too will be destroyed because:

“They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way;” (Amos 2:6b-7a)—which is a handy summary of exactly what Pharaoh did to those same Israelites in Egypt, save that this time the sandal is on the other foot. Amos is one of a dozen voices—all recorded within the Jewish Scriptures—who *from within the life of Israel* keep exhorting Israel not to forsake its commitment to justice, and who keep calling attention to every miscarriage of justice.⁹¹

c) Coveting and Extravagant Life Style

⁹¹ McAfee Brown, *News*, 48.

Isaiah's Verdict:

"Their land is filled with silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures; their land is filled with horses, and there is no end to their chariots. (Is. 2:7) . . . Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!" (Is. 5:8).

Jeremiah's Verdict:

". . . they have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy. Shall I not punish them for these things?" (Jer. 5:28-29a)

Micah's Verdict:

They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance. (Micah 2:2)

Amos' Verdict:

"Alas, for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils. . . . Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away" (Amos 6:4-7, 7:17).

The upper classes had become greedy and had allowed their love of material wealth to lead to the suppression of the rights of the weak and defenseless. Isaiah would have been aware that the coronation of every Davidic king involved the imperative laid upon the monarch to protect the interests of the poor and powerless. (Ps. 72:1-4, 12-14) The failure of the king and those about him to fulfill this charge was loathsome in God's eyes.⁹²

d. Political, and Religious Corruption

Brueggemann suggests Solomon's power is idolatry:

When Israel craved for kingship, she presumed to manage their own existence and seize the initiative for their own well-being. Solomon is a king totally secure in his land that he got for himself, totally committed to keeping his land on his own terms and insensitive to either the cry of his fellows or the gifts and claims of Yahweh. I King 4:1-19 presents the bureaucracy with forced labor (cf. 5:13; 9:15-22) and effective taxation that creates a situation not unlike that of Pharaoh. To ensure against losing the land, Solomon further secures himself by (a) fortification, arms, and the strengthening of the garrisons (I Kings. 9:15) and (b) a network of strategic marriages which surely enhances his standing in neighboring courts. (I Kings 9:16; 11:1-6) All this is capped by the building of the temple

⁹² Sider, *Rich Christians*, 44-45. Sider reports on the disparity between the rich and poor in those days, "Archaeologists have confirmed Amos' picture of shocking extremes of wealth and poverty. In the early days of settlement in Canaan, the land was distributed more or less equally among the families and tribes. Most Israelites enjoyed a similar standard of living. In fact, archaeologists have found that houses as late as the tenth century B.C.E. were all approximately the same size. But by the Amos' day, two centuries later, everything had changed. Bigger, better built houses were found in one area and the poorer houses were huddled together in another section. 'You have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not dwell in them'" (Amos 5:11).

which serves to give theological legitimacy and visible religiosity to the entire program of the regime. God is a domesticated preserver of the regime. He dwells in silent, obedient, and uninterrupted security. Yahweh is now cornered in the temple. His business is support of the regime, to grant legitimacy to it and to effect forgiveness for it, as is necessary.⁹³

Micah's Verdict:

Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; . . . Therefore, because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins. (Micah 3: 9-12)

Prophets understood the foreign invasion, destruction and exile as the work of God. The one who will take the land [home] away from Israel is not some alien power, but it is the Holy One who gave the land [home]. Thus the end of Israel in land and the loss to Babylon is because, "Behold, I am bringing upon you."⁹⁴ "I will end. I will lay waste, I will punish." When landed folk do not remember, it all ends. There is perishing. (Hos. 9:17; 10:15; 12:8-9) History with Yahweh and with land can end.⁹⁵

Ezekiel describes the Babylonians in 23:23-24 as the instrument and the agent of Yahweh who will bring judgment to pass. (cf. Ezek. 5:11-12; 8:18; 20:38; 23:23-24)

Isaiah describes Israel's total sinfulness in one sentence, "Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the LORD, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged!" (Is. 1:4; 2:6-8; 5:7).

The Kinslers summarize what leads Israel to homelessness:

For Israel the land is also temptation. It can be seductive. For the land may give the people a sense of security so that they no longer remember their identity as people of Yahweh, delivered from slavery in Egypt, covenanted with the LORD who delivered them. For Israel the land is responsibility to keep the Law. For Israel the land is threat. Given the new security of possessing their own land, Israel might forget her real identity as a liberated people gifted with this land and fail to trust in Yahweh. They might abandon their covenant with Yahweh and its Sabbath obligations toward debtors, the poor and slaves. This new power and wealth might even lead them to adopt other gods more in keeping with their aberrant life in the land and also in keeping with their pagan neighbors. Thus the people of Israel might lose their faith, their identity, their social experiment, and the land, which normally would mean that they would lose their very lives and existence as a people.⁹⁶

Jeremiah describes what the day will be like when LORD God ruins Judah. "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more" (Jer. 31:15).

⁹³ Brueggeman, *The Land*, 75, 85, 86.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 113-114.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁹⁶ Kinsler and Kinsler, *Jubilee*, 32-33.

Conclusion:

The stories of widows, Hagar, foreign women, Levite's wife, and Jephthah's daughter are stories of homelessness caused by gender, racial, class, socio-economic, and political victimization of women and children. They become slaves of the system which causes homelessness of innocent, harmless, powerless women and children in all times.

Scripture texts witness that whenever Israelites put their trust in themselves, in power, wealth, other gods, do injustice to their poor and stop loving God and neighbor, they fall into homelessness. It is noted that not only did Israel experienced a total defeat, destruction, death and homelessness as a nation and as poor individuals, but also all other empires—Egyptian empire, Babylonian empire, Assyrian empire, Roman Empire—experienced death and homelessness for the same practice of idolatry and injustice as Israel. Does this universal experience apply to our contemporary empires also?

Johnson in his book Sorrows of Empire concludes, "For us, the sorrows of empire may prove to be the inescapable consequence of the path our elites chose after September 11, 2001. Militarism and imperialism always bring with them sorrows. The ubiquitous symbol of the Christian religion, the cross, is perhaps the world's most famous reminder of one sorrow that accompanied the Roman Empire. Roman imperial sorrows mounted up over hundreds of years. Ours are likely arriving with the speed of Fed Ex."⁹⁷

5) What Does the LORD Require of Israel? (Micah 6:8)

Introduction:

Moses presents the Exodus experience as the basis of doing justice and carries the Jubilee vision. As indicated above, the Exodus experience became the policy for Israel to look after the most vulnerable. Life in God's household of freedom means living in obedience to God's way of distributing righteousness. Those who live in the exodus community, in the household of freedom, learn in covenant faithfulness what the Torah requires in the distribution of what it takes for everyone in the household to live. The policy for God's defense of the poor, the stranger, the orphan, the widow, and the needy is made transparent through out the legal codes. "Yahweh himself liberated Yahweh's people when they were strangers and oppressed; therefore Yahweh's redeemed people should show the same compassion toward the homeless ones in their midst (Ex. 22:21; 23:9), for to be homeless means to be subjected to slavery. It is as if Yahweh says

⁹⁷ Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2004), 284-285. If present trends continue, four sorrows are certain to be visited on the U.S. Johnson's four sorrows are: 1) There will be a state of perpetual war, leading to more terrorism against Americans wherever they may be and growing reliance on weapons of mass destruction among smaller nations as they try to ward off the imperial juggernaut; 2) There will be a loss of democracy and constitutional rights as the presidency fully eclipses Congress and is itself transformed from an "executive branch" of government into something more like a Pantagonized presidency; 3) An already well-shredded principle of truthfulness will increasingly be replaced by a system of propaganda, disinformation, and glorification of war, power, and the military legions; 4) There will be bankruptcy, as we pour our economic resources into ever more grandiose military projects and short-change the education, health, and safety of our fellow citizens. The future, is as yet unmade. All these trends can be resisted and other—better—futures can certainly be imagined. But it is important to be as clear-eyed as possible about what the present choices and the present path of our imperial leaders portend.

constantly, ‘I will not tolerate that they be again submitted to slavery.’⁹⁸

Micah raised this important point not only for Israel at that time but for all God’s people throughout human history. Bueggemann asserts:

It is now agreed among a growing number of scholars that Micah is the voice of the village peasant against the rapacious power of the state. Micah watched peasants who were heavily taxed and state policies that were characteristically a matter of indifference to the peasants. So Micah raises the justice question with reference to that social development, the growing power of the urban state. The justice question is always raised from below, not from above. Those in power were preoccupied with prosperity and security and did not notice the cost this imposed on the voiceless peasants.⁹⁹

a) **The Practice of Jubilee (Lev. 25:10 -54)**

The answer to Micah’s question, “What does the LORD require of us,” is spelled out in the Jubilee vision as a concrete way of carrying out Yahweh’s policy, a prevention of and a solution to poverty and homelessness in the land of Israel. Many scholars base the Jubilee vision on the Seventh Day and the Seventh Year Commandments.

The Sabbath Day, Ex. 23:12, “Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed.” The Hebrew verb translated ‘rest’ is *shabat*, from which the word, ‘Sabbath,’ was derived. The verb *shabat* means to cease or desist. To cease work is to rest. (Ex. 20:8-11)¹⁰⁰ “The Sabbath Commandment in Ex. 20: 8-11, Ex. 23:12 and Deut. 5:12-15 is concerned primarily about rest and the de-absolutization of work—that is, with breaking the cycle of work on a regular, weekly basis so that all, people and animals, including slaves and aliens, might rest. Even God rested the seventh day and blessed the Sabbath Day and consecrated it. (Gen. 2:3) The concern for laboring people and animals is thus given divine sanction.”¹⁰¹ The theological foundation here is rather the explicit reference to Israel’s original status as slaves and their liberation from Egypt.

Harris contends that Sabbath is, “A disciplined and regular withdrawal from the systems of productivity whereby the world uses people up to exhaustion. Sabbath was an ethical and moral teaching as well as a liturgical rite, a statement about human beings’ relations with other humans (spouse, children, enslaved and indentured workers, and strangers). Sabbath also was assumed for other animals and the earth.”¹⁰²

Sabbath Year (Ex. 23: 10-11; Deut. 15:1-18; Lev. 25: 1-7)

“For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they

⁹⁸ Meeks, *The Economist*, 85. Haskell M. Miller, *Social Ministry* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2000), 25.

⁹⁹ Walter Brueggemann, “Voices of the Night – Against Justice”, in *To Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly*, Walter Brueggemann, Sharon Park & Thomas H. Groom (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 7.

¹⁰⁰ Robert B. Coote & David Robert Ord, *In the Beginning* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 78.

¹⁰¹ Kinsler and Kinsler, *Jubilee*, 10.

¹⁰² Maria Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996), 31.

leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard” (Ex. 23:10-11). “Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts” (Deut. 15:1). If a member of your community, whether a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and works for you six years, in the seventh year you shall set that person free” (Deut. 15: 12).

The Basis of Liberation, “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today” (Deut. 15:15). Deuteronomic tradition displays a particular concern for those who have none of the built-in supports. This concern is expressed through the oft-repeated refrain which points to the widow, the orphan, and the sojourner as objects of particular concern. (15:7, 11)¹⁰³

Coote explains the social context of O.T. times that needed Sabbath law:

Peasants living on the margin of subsistence in a land where drought is common—on average every two or three years—found it easy to fall into debt. If they had to eat their seed due to a low harvest, it meant borrowing to buy seed to plant the next fall. Taxes, rents, fees, charges, interest, and fines were excessive. For security, peasants would put up their ox or ass if they had one, their own bodies as slave labor for a given period of time, the body of a daughter in prostitution, or their land. Custom and law in Palestine periodically prescribed ways to alleviate the hardship caused by the loss of such securities.¹⁰⁴

The above texts introduce the agricultural fallow year that was to be observed every seventh year. The purpose of the fallow year is humanitarian: those who do not own land are allowed to harvest crops produced spontaneously by it in the years when it is not cultivated. The rationale for the legislation throughout the Exodus 23 is found in 23:9, “You shall not oppress a stranger; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” It is their experience of liberation at the hand of God that is the basis of their subsequent actions.¹⁰⁵

The Deuteronomic text is Moses’ last exhortation to his people as they prepare to enter the Promised Land. The Kinslers make point similar to those of Coote regarding the socio-economic context of the day that needed Sabbath Year legislation.

Debt and slavery:

Originally, every family of Israel, with the exception of the Levites, had its own parcel of land as the basis of its economic well-being and social security. Sooner or later, however, families faced natural disasters, violent intervention by local, national, or international exploitation, or even faulty administration. If adversity continued or if loans were provided

¹⁰³ Kinsler and Kinsler, *Jubilee*, 73. The Kinslers continue, “The Priestly Tradition brought the Pentateuch to final form during the critical periods of the exile and restoration, ended by 400 B.C. Jeffrey Fager comments on the social function of the priestly writings, “The purpose of *P* is threefold: (1) to preserve the ancient traditions now endangered by the Babylonian conquest, (2) to explain that conquest in terms of divine punishment, and (3) to provide a foundation for proper living in the future. The Jubilee land laws were used by *P* to perform this threefold function in the social milieu of the exile for the sake of the community and in order to promote some of their own interests.

¹⁰⁴ Coote & Ord, *The Beginning*, 124.

¹⁰⁵ Sharon H. Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 19.

at high interest, the borrower might not be able to pay them back, and they might lose their land, which was the only security for their loans. If they lost their land, they might become day laborers or share croppers, or they could fall into slavery. This would lead to increasing poverty, breakup of the family, loss of dignity, and, very likely, malnutrition, illness, and even death. So the Deuteronomic Code required that every seventh year debts should be cancelled and slaves freed, halting the “normal” process of socioeconomic marginalization and impoverishment. The intention is that, “There will be no one in need among you.” The commandment of Yahweh is, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land” (Deut. 15: 4-9, 11-14). This subversive memory is reinforced by the warning, “Your neighbor might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt,” just as the slaves in Egypt had cried out and were liberated. (15:9) The Sabbath mandate is a radical confrontation with the principal mechanisms of marginalization and alienation. Further, these mandates are founded upon the spirituality of liberation emerging out of the Exodus experience. God freed the Hebrew slaves in order to create an alterative social order.¹⁰⁶

Jubilee:

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud on the **day of atonement**. And you shall hallow the **fiftieth year** and you shall proclaim **liberty** throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a **Jubilee** for you. [*Emphasis mine*] You shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. You shall not sow, or reap the after growth, or harvest the unpruned vines. (Lev. 25:8-11) What was sold shall remain with the purchaser until the year of Jubilee; in the Jubilee it shall be released, and the property shall be returned.(Lev.25:28)

The texts speak of a return to property and family: Lev. 25:14-17 and 25:23-28 regulate the sale and redemption of real estate, while Lev. 25: 29-34 deals with the special case of land in Levitical cities; Lev. 25: 39-41 (25:47-55): ”If any who are dependent on you become so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves. They shall remain with you as hired or bound laborers. They shall serve with you until the year of the Jubilee. Then they and their children with them shall be free from your authority; they shall go back to their own family and return to their ancestral property.” These texts mandate the redemption and liberation of kinfolk who have sold themselves into slavery, and thus by implication also mandate the cancellation of the debts that have necessitated the sale.

The reason for release of slaves: “For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold” (Lev. 25:42). The reason for redemption of land: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants” (Lev. 25:23). “The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it “(Ps. 24:1). Care for the needy: “If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens” (Lev. 25: 35).

The principle Jubilee passage is Leviticus 25, a key text from the Holiness Code. This passage includes portions concerning the Sabbath Year (vv. 1-7 and 18-22), but the rest concerns the Jubilee Year. It may be that Jubilee originally referred to a seven-year cycle

¹⁰⁶ Kinsler and Kinsler, *Jubilee*, 14.

and later to forty-nine or fifty-year cycles. In any case, the remarkable addition in Leviticus 25 is the mandate that would permit every Israelite to return to his or her land and home at the time of Jubilee. This mandate completes the socioeconomic intention of the Sabbath release laws of Deuteronomy 15, that is, the reversal of the mechanisms of wealth accumulation and marginalization.¹⁰⁷

The particular form of forgiveness that Jubilee emphasizes is forgiveness from debts. Therefore, the Jubilee forgiveness starts with the removal of the very specific burden of a monetary debt. The word for this is *deror*, the Hebrew word for ‘liberation,’ especially from debt. Other terms share an etymology. Among these are *aphiemi*, meaning to remit, release from debt, send away; it is a Greek term that also shows up as the noun *aphesis* and, in the Septuagint, as *aphienai*. These words are important because they begin as references to remission or release or dismissal—liberation—from long obligations tied to legal requirements, bonds, and debts (especially financial ones). However, they can also refer to forgiveness in the more usual religious, ethical, and moral sense, as the removal of and atonement for sin.¹⁰⁸

For any peasant culture, dependence on the land is fundamental for food, survival, security, and present and future well-being. Here the ultimate solution is found to the problem of exploitation, poverty, and marginalization, every fifty years, through the redistribution of the land to all the families of Israel. It was meant to provide hope to all the people, event to those in the worst circumstances, that their lives would be reestablished in the Year of Jubilee. It was not simply a socioeconomic plan; it was a divine mandate (policy), a holy obligation in keeping with God’s rule. “You shall fear your God; for I am the LORD your God” (Lev. 25:17).¹⁰⁹

Yahweh’s policy on the Sabbath Day, Sabbath Year, and Jubilee shed some light as to how people could have fallen into poverty and homelessness after settling down in the Promised Land or after return from exile. The text presents Yahweh’s policy for the prevention of and a solution to the homelessness of Israel people.

The Jubilee command gives the message that God owns everything including people and natural resources. Jubilee is God’s driving motivation for liberation; Jubilee is a response to God’s gracious liberation and deliverance from the Egyptian slavery; the Jubilee response has one eye on history, on God’s gracious acts of deliverance. The other eye is on the less fortunate. Jubilee behavior responds to God’s act in history and to the cries of those crushed by social injustice. Jubilee envisions a social revolution. It is an upside-down

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 76.

¹⁰⁸ Harris, *Proclaim*, 37.

¹⁰⁹ Kinsler and Kinsler, *Jubilee*, 15-16. According to Ringe, “The disparate collection appears to be made up of pieces of ancient material from several periods, probably woven together as part of the Holiness Code by a priestly editor of the late exilic or postexilic period. The new compilation would resolve a major problem accompanying the people’s return from exile, namely, the allocation and subsequent management of the land. The Jubilee laws are public, general laws affecting the whole country at once, and not private contracts between creditor and debtor, as is the case in Exod. 21:2-6 and Deut. 15:1-18. The laws in Lev. 25:47-54 provide for the release of those indentured to non-Israelites, which the Sabbath-year laws do not. The command to return to the land of one’s ancestors, marks another significant difference between the laws in Leviticus and those in Deuteronomy and Exodus. Like the laws concerning the release of slaves, provisions for a return to one’s land imply the cancellation of debts. With the restoration of real estate, however, the former debtor could hope to attain economic independence instead of merely beginning a new cycle of poverty and indebtedness. Ringe, *Liberation*, 26-27

revolution. The Jubilee concept is rooted in a keen awareness of human sin and greed. Without social controls, economic pyramids rise. Without constraints and periodic leveling, the weak at the bottom are stamped into the dirt. Societies must have special provision to defend and protect the helpless.¹¹⁰

McAfee Brown concludes that the vision of Jubilee year never actually got off the ground, but still it has remained as a *symbol of hope*—a central biblical hope—a declaration that things don't have to stay the way they are. There can be change, not just for the worse but for the better, and the victims, the poor, the afflicted are the targets of this message. *Things can be reversed.* [*Emphasis mine.*] Whether that is good news or bad news depends on whether we are on the top or the bottom of the heap.¹¹¹

b) The Fruit of Jubilee Is Shalom

Throughout the Biblical history, many prophets' oracles present enough evidence of the Jubilee vision. As the Scripture texts clearly state and as many scholars have argued, the Jubilee mandates—cancellation of debts, sending slaves and children sold for debts back to own family, resting the land one year, and property sold for debts returned to the original owner every fiftieth year—all mean the joyful coming home for the poor from their true and long homelessness; it is “justice” brought to the poor. This is shalom. There is no peace when greedy systems oppress the poor. An individualism, that cares only about number one also destroys the harmony of community.”¹¹²

Jeremiah presents “seeking shalom” as a way of doing justice to the undeserved so that Israel would have shalom in the enemy's land. Although it sounds paradoxical, it is a commandment from God. “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:7). Jeremiah wrote a letter to the displaced persons in hated Babylon, where they were sent against their will and then watched their life and culture collapse. They were yearning to go home. And the speaker for the vision dares to say, “Your *shalom* will be found in Babylon's *shalom*” (Jer. 29:7). The well-being of the chosen ones is tied to the well-being of that hated metropolis, which the chosen people fear and resent. Again it is affirmed that God's *shalom* is known only by those in an inclusive, caring community.¹¹³

According to Walter Brueggeman, *Shalom* is well-being of a material, physical,

¹¹⁰ Kraybill, *Upside-Down*, 89-92. Kraybill informs that historical reference outside the Scriptures suggest that the practice of letting land idle on the sabbatical year continued until the destruction of the temple in 70C.E. and perhaps even later. It's uncertain, however, how often slaves, debts and land were restored. Some evidence suggests at least partial observance of these practices. During the reign of Zedekiah, before Jerusalem fell to Babylon in 586 B.C.E., the rich released their slaves but soon recaptured them. Jeremiah fumed at their disobedience. (Jer. 34:16-17). Jeremiah viewed the sabbatical violation as one of the reasons for the impending destruction of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 34:18-22). About 423 B.C.E. Nehemiah (5:1-13) rebuked the people for not observing the Jubilee after returning from captivity. Ezekiel calls for reestablishment the Jubilee (Ezek. 45:7-9; 46:16-18). A leading Pharisee, Hillel, living about the time of Jesus' birth, started a legal practice called *prosbul*. This legal procedure ended the devastating effect of canceling debt every six years. Despite erratic practice, the sabbatical and jubilee were important symbolic markers of Hebrew time. Above all, they embodied key theological values. 87-88

¹¹¹ Robert McAfee Brown, *Reclaiming the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 35.

¹¹² Kraybill, *Upside-Down*, 191.

¹¹³ Brueggeman, *The Land*, 22.

historical kind, and “salvation” in the midst of enemies. If there is to be well-being, it will not be for isolated, insulated individuals only; rather, it will be security and prosperity granted to a whole community—young and old, rich and poor, powerful and dependent. *Shalom* comes only to the inclusive, embracing community that excludes none.”¹¹⁴

The O.T. presents Israel the whole of Israel as the oppressed people but then it also presents the poor, abused and oppressed within its own culture and system. God always appears as the liberator for oppressed Israel. But the same liberator God punishes every time when Israel oppresses and exploits the poor.

Therefore, Israel goes in and out of homelessness throughout the biblical history depending on their relationship with God and their neighbors—whether they are able to love God and live out God’s mandate and policy for the poor. The O.T. witnesses to the fact that God’s intention is to bring all God’s people home.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 15.