

CHAPTER I

The Narrative Embedment of Prophetic Preaching

IT IS MY HOPE, in what follows, to make a credible connection between the material of “prophetic utterance” in the Old Testament itself and the actual practice of “prophetic preaching” that is mandated in the actual work of pastors who are located in worshipping congregations. It is not difficult to see what the prophets of the Old Testament are doing, and we have ample interpretive analyses of that work.¹ But the transposition from that ancient clarity to contemporary social, ecclesial reality is not easy or obvious.² “Prophetic preaching,” undertaken by working pastors, is profoundly difficult and leaves the preacher in an ambiguous and exposed position. The task is difficult because such a preacher must at the same time “speak truth” while maintaining a budget, a membership, and a program in a context that is often not prepared for such truthfulness. Indeed, given the seductions and accommodations of many congregations, not to mention larger judicatories in the church, such venues are often not readily venues for truth-telling.

Given that problematic reality that is ubiquitous and systemic, we may also note that “prophetic preaching” is not in its definition obvious. On the one hand and popularly, “prophetic preaching” may mean to take up the great issues of the day, so that the preacher is cast, with some immediacy, in the role of prophet. On the other hand, it is possible to construe “prophetic preaching” as a probe of ancient prophetic texts with inescapable side glances at contemporary issues. This latter perspective focuses on texts rather than immediate contemporary context; in many congregations this is a more viable approach

that may lead, on occasion, to direct or implied connections. My own judgment is that for most preachers in most congregational settings, a focus on the biblical prophetic text—with traces that connect to contemporaneity—is a more realistic way to proceed. For that reason I have elsewhere suggested that the preacher may be a “scribe” who handles old texts and permits them to be seen with contemporary force and authority.³ In such an approach, the preacher-scribe is not cast as a prophet but as a handler of the prophetic tradition who brings to availability a treasure of what is old (tradition) and what is new (contemporaneity) (Matt. 13:51-53). It will be this latter perspective that I pursue in this discussion.

I

When I ponder what the ancient prophets in Israel are doing as we have them in the text, I arrive at this judgment that will serve as my guiding thesis: prophetic proclamation is an attempt to imagine the world as though YHWH—the creator of the world, the deliverer of Israel, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ whom we Christians come to name as Father, Son, and Spirit—were a real character and an effective agent in the world. I use the subjunctive “were” because such a claim is not self-evident and remains to be established again and again in every such utterance. The key term in my thesis is “imagine,” that is, to utter, entertain, describe, and construe a world other than the one that is manifest in front to us, for that present world is readily and commonly taken without such agency or character for YHWH. Thus the offer of prophetic imagination is one that contradicts the taken-for-granted world around us.⁴

At the outset, it is clear that this way of putting the matter refuses two common assumptions. On the one hand, it rejects the more conservative assumption that the prophets were predictors, those who tell the future, with particular reference to predictions of the coming Christ. On the other hand, this thesis refuses the common liberal assumption that the prophets were social activists who worked to establish social justice. It strikes me that the ancient prophets only rarely took up any concrete social issue. More important to them than concrete social issues is the fact that they characteristically spoke in poetic idiom with rich metaphors, so that their language is recurrently teasing, elusive, and evocative, with lesser accent on instruction or didacticism.⁵

My thesis about “imagining” with reference to YHWH exposes two common seductions about our characteristic theological speech. It is not easy or obvious about how to “imagine YHWH” because the God of Israel fits

none of our conventional theological categories. On the one hand, we tend to imagine the world with reference to other gods, that is, by a practice of *idolatry*. Thus we imagine the world according to a remote God who is not involved in the world and who could not intervene in the world; thus “rational Christians” may regard “an interventionist God” as a silly notion. Or we take God as a pet who is preoccupied with our well-being, or variously as the god of nation, party, race, gender, or ideology. Thus the temptation is to an *irrelevant transcendence* or a *cozy immanence*. None of these conventional ways serves well the hard, dangerous work of “imagining YHWH.”

On the other hand, perhaps more likely, we imagine the world with reference to no god at all, that is, as *atheism*.⁶ We reduce reality to manageable proportion, imagine our autonomy with accountability to no one, a matter of “might makes right” or simply that it is all “a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing.” While such atheism is a persistent possibility in modern rationality, it is most often the case that some idol lurks at the edge of such atheism, so that idolatry is surely the more immediate and compelling temptation.⁷ The prophetic task of “imagining YHWH” flies in the face of our *conventional idolatries* and/or our *conventional atheisms*. The task requires courage and unfettered imagination as well as categories that are unsettling and subversive of the way we conventionally prefer to construe reality.

Given my thesis that imagining YHWH as a real character and as an effective agent in the world leads then to a second, derivative thesis: prophetic proclamation is the staging and performance of a contest between two narrative accounts of the world and an effort to show that the YHWH account of reality is more adequate and finally more reliable than the dominant narrative account that is cast among us as though it were true and beyond critique.⁸ This performed contestation between narratives is modeled in narrative simplicity and directness in Elijah’s contest at Mt. Carmel in which he defiantly requires a decision between narratives and so between gods: “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kgs. 18:21). This dramatic utterance is in fact a summary of a long, vigorous contestation between two narratives and two consequent construals of reality.⁹

The present form of that contestation, I propose, is the felt and often denied tension between the gospel narrative that specializes in social transformation, justice, and compassion and the dominant narrative of our culture that I have elsewhere termed “military consumerism.”¹⁰ The contestation that is constituted by prophetic preaching is in our own time, as always, profoundly difficult because the dominant narrative, the one contradicted by the narrative of YHWH, is seldom recognized as a social construction and is almost never

lined out in its full clarity and claim. The contestation, moreover, is difficult because the YHWH narrative is rarely recognized as a genuine alternative to the dominant narrative and is more often reckoned as a footnote or a pin prick to the dominant narrative but not a real alternative. In our time and circumstance, the narrative of US military consumerism and the YHWH narrative of social transformation, justice, and compassion are deeply intertwined and there is great resistance to sorting them out.¹¹

Thus I suggest that prophetic preaching can take place only where the preacher is deeply embedded in the YHWH narrative. When the listening community is also embedded there or at least has a residual attachment to that narrative, a chance for engagement is offered. In most ecclesial practice, the sign of congregational embedment or residual attachment to that YHWH narrative is baptism that gives dramatic access to that alternative narrative. Membership in that alternative narrative is consequently realized and enhanced through socialization in education and pastoral nurture. Thus prophetic preaching takes place in a context where a very different subversive conversation about reality is available. In many church contexts, of course, the possibility for such a conversation is eroded or compromised. Such erosion or compromise makes the task more difficult but for that reason also more urgent.

II

The backdrop of prophetic preaching is the dispute between narratives. Many congregations and many preachers would much prefer to keep that dispute hidden or silenced. But the dispute is characteristically present in any case, as the adherents to the dominant narrative are acutely vigilant about any hint that that narrative may be placed in question.

The dominant narrative—one I have characterized as “therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism”—is committed to the notion of *self-invention* in the pursuit of *self-sufficiency*. Between a beginning in self-invention and a culmination in self-sufficiency, that narrative enjoins to *competitive productivity*, motivated by pervasive anxiety about having enough, or being enough, or being in control. Thus it is an acting out, in quotidian ways, of the modern sense of an autonomous self that eventuates in a rat race that readily culminates in violence if and when that self is impinged upon in inconvenient ways. That dominant narrative is seldom lined out, rarely seen in its coherence, and hardly ever critiqued in its elemental claims. That, I propose, is the matrix for prophetic preaching. In ancient Israel it was a matrix governed by the unconditional claim of the Davidic dynasty and the perpetual guarantee of

divine presence in the Jerusalem temple, both claims exploited by King Solomon in his propensity to accumulation. In the contemporary United States, it is a matrix that in parallel fashion is rooted in a conviction concerning *US exceptionalism* that gives warrant to the usurpatious pursuit of commodities in the name of freedom, at the expense of the neighbor.¹²

Prophetic preaching is rooted in the alternative narrative of the God of Israel. Like the dominant narrative, that alternative narrative can also be lined out in various modes:

1. In the Old Testament, that alternative narrative is given succinct expression in what Gerhard von Rad termed Israel's "credo," which features the promise to the ancestors, the Exodus deliverance, and the entry into the land of promise, all accomplished by the powerful fidelity of YHWH.¹³ At core, Israel confessed: "The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Deut. 26:8-9). One need not follow von Rad's now doubted critical judgments to see this recital as a reliable summary of core faith in Israel.

2. In the New Testament, the counterpoint to von Rad's "credo" is given, as C. H. Dodd averred, in the Pauline summary witness of 1 Corinthians 15:3-5:¹⁴ "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures . . ." Of this statement, Dodd judges, "The Pauline *kerigma*, therefore, is a proclamation of the facts of death and resurrection of Christ in an eschatological setting which gives significance to the facts."¹⁵ Here the narrative revolves around Christ, but clearly it assumes the action of the God of Israel who is the God of the church.

3. In the normative narrative of the church, the same story is recited in the classic formulations of the Nicene Creed and the Apostles Creed, both of which pivot on the incarnation, on the death and resurrection of Christ.

4. In a classic Jewish statement, Franz Rosenzweig has lined out the faith of Judaism under the rubrics of "Creation-Revelation-Redemption."¹⁶

These several tellings of "the old, old story" of course yield different accents. They are, however, agreed that YHWH (in Christian confession, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ) is the deciding character and key agent in the historical-cosmic process. While the variations are of course significant, the commonality of all of these tellings is evident when it is contrasted with the dominant narrative of *self-invention*, *competitive productivity*, and *self-sufficiency*, a narrative without the defining agency of YHWH.

One could make the argument that I seek to make here about prophetic preaching by appeal to any of these versions of the narrative. Here I will pursue my theme of the narrative embedment of prophetic preaching with reference to the Pentateuch, which is, as von Rad has shown, the core narrative of Israel writ large. It is clear that that narrative in the Old Testament, in its many variations, is offered as an alternative, a contradiction, and a subversion of the dominant narrative that was all around Israel, variously as “Canaanite religion” (in the case of Elijah) or the imperial imposition of a series of superpowers. *Mutatis mutandis*, the apostolic witness of the New Testament was an alternative to various narrative offers, notably that of Roman power legitimated by Roman religion.¹⁷

Thus the prophetic preacher is grounded in that alternative narrative that insists upon discerning life with reference to the God who dominates and occupies that narrative. The preacher thus has at hand the materials out of which to continue to “imagine” YHWH. In moving from such narrative embedment:

- The preacher must keep deciding in pastoral ways about the means and pace for advocating this narrative in such a contested environment wherein many listeners have no zeal about such contestation and do not want the dominant narrative placed in question.
- The preacher must be continually aware of the many and deep ways in which the dominant narrative is defining for her own life, so that no one of us is immune to the contradiction that is to be faced.
- The preacher must remember that when the congregation (or some part of it) is deeply and convincingly embedded in the dominant narrative, prophetic preaching that advocates the counter-narrative sounds like unbearable nonsense. I believe that such an “epistemological misfit” is defining for prophetic preaching, as it must have been in ancient Israel. From the perspective of the dominant narrative, advocacy of this alternative narrative sounds at best like foolishness, thus the foolishness of such preaching (1 Cor. 1:18-25).

III

Thus I consider the pentateuchal narrative as the base and assumption for prophetic preaching in the Old Testament. That no doubt is how the canon of the Old Testament is arranged, an arrangement that subsequently came to be tagged as “the law and the prophets,” that is, the Torah corpus of the

Pentateuch and the prophetic corpus that follows. Such a canonical arrangement, it will be recognized, is in tension with what has become the accepted critical judgment that the prophetic corpus in fact is antecedent to the formation of the Pentateuch in the sixth-fifth centuries BCE.¹⁸ While acknowledging the force of that critical judgment, it is not unreasonable to proceed here on the basis of the canonical arrangement, recognizing that I am engaged in a post-critical interpretation that is not uninformed by critical perspective.¹⁹

1. At the center of the pentateuchal narrative is the core presentation of Moses. He is the dominant figure in the narrative, and for that reason it is not surprising that he has traditionally been taken as the author of the narrative. The “Mosaic center” features three narrative themes:²⁰

(a) The Exodus deliverance is a divine emancipation of slaves wrought through a daring human agent. The narrative account of Exodus 1–15 moves from *the cry of distress* on the lips of the slaves (Exod. 2:23-24) to *the celebrative elation* of the emancipated slaves (Exod. 15:1-18, 20-21). That movement from cry to joy is defining for the narrative; conversely the well-being of the empire, the great adversary of YHWH, is reduced to a desperate cry (Exod. 12:29-32).²¹ There is no doubt that the same movement from cry to joy is reflected in the terse teaching of Jesus: “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. . . . Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep” (Luke 6:21, 25). It is clear that the exodus is accomplished by the will, power, and transformative energy of YHWH, an affirmation voiced in the singing of Israel:

He sent darkness, and made the land dark;

 He struck down all the firstborn in their land,
 the first issue of all their strength. . . .

 Egypt was glad when they departed,
 for dread of them had fallen upon it. (Ps. 105:28, 36, 38)

It is clear, at the same time, that the exodus depended upon willing human agency, for it is Moses who is dispatched to Pharaoh: “So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt” (Exod. 3:10; see Ps. 105:26-27). The narrative easily asserts “double agency” about the act of emancipation, an assertion that pervades Israel’s memory.

(b) The tradition of wilderness sojourn is “travel music” from bondage to new land. The music performs the arid, destitute travel of faith in

territory that lacks a viable life support system. The narrative tells of the desperate anxiety and protest of emancipated Israel and the responsive action of YHWH in providing meat, bread, and water in a context where there was none. It turns out, in Israel's telling, that the power of YHWH transformed a milieu of death into one of fruitful sustenance. It is that transformative capacity of which Israel continues to sing:

The wilderness and dry land shall be glad,
 the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
 like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
 and rejoice with joy and singing. (Isaiah 35:1)

I will open rivers on the bare heights,
 and fountains in the midst of the valleys;
 I will make the wilderness a pool of water,
 and the dry land spring of water.
 I will put in the wilderness the cedar,
 the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive;
 I will set in the desert the cypress,
 the plane and the pine together,
 so that all may see and know,
 all may consider and understand,
 that the hand of the LORD has done this,
 the Holy One of Israel has created it. (Isa. 41:18-20)

(c) At Sinai, Israel gladly received Torah commandments as an alternative to the coercive commands of Pharaoh (Exod. 19:8). Israel received the Decalogue (Exod. 20:21-17) and swore allegiance to the God of covenant who is the God of emancipation (Exod. 24:3, 7). The outcome is that Israel is shaped as a community of listening obedience whose life is from YHWH, the God of emancipation, whose life is to be lived back to YHWH in grateful response.

This sequence of a) *cry to joy*, b) *faithful transformative sustenance*, and c) *listening obedience* becomes the defining accent for the life of Israel that is lived in dialogic engagement with YHWH. It is this dialogic engagement that constitutes Israel's life as a people holy to YHWH (Exod. 19:5-6).

2. The "canonical" narrative of exodus-wilderness, sojourn-Sinai covenant takes on a continuing life in the traditioning processes of Israel, a process that has been awkwardly but powerfully articulated in the "Documentary Hypothesis" of nineteenth-century scholarship.²² The ongoing interpretive

process (that yielded the materials of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) exhibits the way in which the covenant of Sinai is subsequently codified to remain contemporary in Israel, always for a new time, a new place, and a new circumstance.

On the one hand, that codification led to the so-called “Priestly” materials of Exodus-Leviticus-Numbers, a careful articulation of holy times, holy places, and holy people that could give Israel a quite distinct identity as the people of YHWH amid the peoples of the world. On the other hand, more pertinent and more interesting for our topic, the Sinai tradition was alternatively codified in the tradition of Deuteronomy. That tradition has a remarkably supple dynamism that permitted the Torah of Sinai to be always again reformulated in fresh terms.²³ Thus the Torah requirements of the book of Deuteronomy move from the Sinai formulation in contemporizing ways. The covenant is eventually given articulation as an unaccommodating quid-pro-quo structure of obedience-blessing or alternatively, disobedience-curse:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. . . . Choose life so that you and your descendants may live . . . (Deut. 30:15-10)

Israel’s continued life in the abundant land of promise is made closely conditioned on the basis of Torah-keeping. Through the interpretive process, *the gifts of YHWH* (blessings of creation, miracles of history) and *YHWH’s claims* on Israel’s life through Torah commandments are made defining and non-negotiable for the public life of Israel and, by derivation, for the public life of the world.

This succinct formulation of quid pro quo is decisive for what follows in prophetic preaching, even as it is exceedingly difficult in the modern world. It is plausible, of course, to take that characteristic covenantal formulation in a flat “supernatural” sense that makes it easy to dismiss in the modern world. It is also possible, however, to see the quid-pro-quo formulation of Deuteronomy as a shrewd discernment of the governance of the world that

cannot be mocked, a givenness that is, in Israel's parlance, guaranteed by the creator God. Thus the *Sinai formulation* is linked to the *givenness of the created order*. The God of covenant is the creator God. This connection, especially articulated by Hans Heinrich Schmid, permits the judgment that Deuteronomy is informed by the observant shrewdness of the wisdom teachers who eschew a crude supernaturalism but who nonetheless see that ethical requirements and limits of lived reality are acknowledged so that actions bring with them inescapable consequences.²⁴ The world, in this purview, is morally coherent and is guaranteed by the God who occupies the narrative of Exodus-sojourn-Sinai. It is impossible to understand the movement of the Old Testament from the Torah to the prophets unless this defining conviction about YHWH's governance is fully recognized. At the same time, it is important to recognize how such a discernment of reality, given with narrative particularity, flies in the face of modernist notions of autonomy.

3. The Mosaic narrative in the Pentateuch has as its introduction two narrative accounts of unexpected gifts from YHWH that are completely inexplicable:

(a) The creation narrative of Genesis 1, also likely an exilic act of defiant hope, witnesses to the way in which God, by an issue of command, "calls the world into being."²⁵ The vision of Genesis 1 concerns an inexplicable miracle from God that has as its outcome a teeming abundance of fruitfulness in the earth. The narrative of God's initiatory goodness is antecedent to any notion of parsimony, because YHWH's will for life provides for all of creation.

(b) The wonder of creation is matched in the ancestral narratives of Genesis 12–50 with the capacity of God to call forth, in each successive generation, a faithful people that has itself reached a dead end. The narrative is shot through with the promissory resolve of YHWH. Writ large, the promises of YHWH concern a land for the family of Abraham and Sarah that is also to be blessing to the families of the nations (Gen. 12:3). But those large promises depend upon the intimate promise made to the old couple, Abraham and Sarah. In their aging days, Abraham, "as good as dead" (Heb. 11:12), and Sarah received a promise from God: "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son" (Gen. 18:10). By the end of the narrative, it is affirmed that God can do the impossible: "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" (Gen. 18:14). The rhetorical question receives a "no" in the tradition: no, it is not impossible for God! It is impossible for the old couple to have a son and an heir. The entire narrative of Genesis turns on this divine impossibility, a wonder that is reenacted in subsequent generations for a series of

barren women.²⁶ The entire future of Israel depends, in each generation, on the capacity and resolve of YHWH to make a way out of no way. This reiterated miracle of new life in a context of hopelessness evokes in Israel a due sense of awe that issues in doxology. Well, it issues in laughter: “Now Sarah said, ‘God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me’” (Gen. 21:6). In subsequent Christian tradition, that laugh has become an “Easter laugh,” a deep sweep of elation that looks death and despair in the face and mocks them. The ancestral narratives attest to the power of YHWH to create new historical possibilities where there is no ground for expectation.

IV

This complex, thick, multilayered narrative provides the theological accents and the interpretive nerve that permit Israel to contest the dominant narrative of the world that is told and retold all around Israel by those who want to talk Israel out of its distinctive narrative and its dangerous, undomesticated imagination. That narrative (and its ongoing imaginative force), however, continue to sustain faithful Israel and make Israel an inconvenience in the world of the dominant narrative. Before we move on to prophetic preaching, we may consider, in three perspectives, the insistent, generative force of this counter narrative:

1. The Pentateuchal narrative posits and permits a series of convictions that could be attested in a variety of ways:

- The world begins in wonder concerning the inexplicable abundance willed by God the creator.
- The history and future of this peculiar people depends upon the inexplicable gift of an heir, so that the force of familial blessing is given, generation by generation, albeit always at the last minute.
- The work of Moses, at the behest of YHWH, is the emancipation of the slaves from Pharaoh’s cheap labor program. The God of the exodus exhibits a solidarity with the exploited slaves of the empire and an alert edge about undoing that exploitation that is enacted by political imagination and courage.
- The work of Moses is to manage the process of inexplicable nurture and nourishment in an environment where no such resources were on offer. It is the astonished awareness of Israel that the gifts of life are wondrously given in contexts of chaos and death.

- The work of Moses is to administer the process whereby a covenant is enacted between holy God and historical people, a covenant that assured that the emancipated people will continue to live its life in emancipatory ways that defy all conventional notions of injustice.²⁷
- The ongoing tradition of Deuteronomy, subsequent to Moses, exhibits the interpretive elasticity of the Mosaic memory and transposes the covenant of Sinai into a theology of accountability in which Israel's future depends upon adherence to non-negotiable Torah.
- The destiny of Moses and Israel is to wait. That wait is marked by confidence in God's fidelity; but it is by faith and not by sight. Moses can see the land of promise, but he cannot see how it will be given or received.

The large sweep of this normative narrative moves from initial wonder (Genesis, twice) to expectant waiting (Deut. 34). In that move *from wonder to wait* by way of covenant, YHWH is placed front and center in the life of Israel and, derivatively, in the life of the world. The story of Israel cannot be told or received without the central character, who defies all political and epistemological conventions.

2. On all counts, this narrative, with its move from wonder to wait, contradicts the narrative of self-invention, competitive productivity, and self-sufficiency. Israel's life is a life that contradicts the way of the world:

- Wonder instead of self-invention;
- Emancipation instead of the rat race of production;
- Nourishment instead of labor for that which does not satisfy;
- Covenantal dialogue instead of tyrannical monopoly or autonomous anxiety;
- A quid pro quo of accountability instead of either abdicating submissiveness or autonomous self-assertion;
- Waiting instead of having or despair about not having.

At every accent point in the narrative, the tradition of Israel asserts that the dominant narrative of the world is not adequate and so cannot be true. It cannot be adequate because it omits the defining resolve and capacity of YHWH, the lead character in the life of the world.

3. In the New Testament and the Christian tradition, the ancient story of Israel is retold with reference to Jesus. This is not to say it is a better rendering that supersedes that of Israel; of course not. It is only to recognize that it is a

different rendering, but one that cannot be understood without reference to the more ancient rendering. In Christian tradition,

- The wonder of creation is cast as the wonder of Christ's birth, surrounded by angels and guiding star;
- The requirements of covenant are exhibited in the public ministry of Jesus and in his summons to discipleship. As Israel is called at Sinai to a distinct identity, so Christ's call to discipleship is a summons to join his alternative practice of reality. Because his summons contests the dominant regime (the empire of Rome), he was executed (crucifixion) by the empire through which the dominant narrative has its Friday moment of prevailing.
- His resurrection (and ultimate return in power) is an act of waiting on the part of the church for gifts that are yet to be given and promises that are yet to be kept.

I have no wish to force Israel's narrative into the categories of Christian formulation or to insist on exact counterpoints between the traditions. My intent is only to suggest that the ancient narrative of Israel—retold in Judaism—and the Christian rendering of the same narrative share, in the face of the dominant narrative, a peculiar narrative made peculiar by the character who occupies center stage.²⁸ It is, of course, impossible to tell this story without the defining agency of YHWH who is decisive in every point of the story. It is for that reason that every critical attempt to discern or “explain” the story on historical grounds is bound to be inadequate and to fail. There is no story without the character of YHWH. At the same time, we must recognize that the telling of this story is an enormous act of imagination. It is on the lips of the storytellers that YHWH takes on life. It is always easy enough for adherents of the dominant story to dismiss this alternative narrative because YHWH, the defining agent in that narrative, does not even register in the categories of the dominant narrative.

Thus it is the work of endless reperformance to continue to make this alternative account of reality available and persuasive. It is for that reason that the narrative itself, in Exodus 12–13, takes such care to instruct about the proper reperformance of the narrative at Passover. It is for the same reason, moreover, that Paul twice underscores the traditioning process alive, once with reference to the crucifixion-resurrection and once with reference to the Eucharist as the matrix for the narrative (1 Cor. 11:23-26; 15:3-8). Prophetic preaching depends upon the regular reperformance of this narrative that presents YHWH, the agent of wonder and nourishment, the giver

of commandments who presides over our waiting, as the defining reality of the world. It is this retelling that creates an environment for prophetic preaching. And where the narrative is not kept available and persuasive in all its scandalous force, prophetic preaching has little chance of being either uttered or heard.

V

Israel's narrative account of reality has been a matter of contestation with other narrative accounts of reality since its earliest formulation—whenever that was. As we have it, the initial contestation is between Pharaoh (bricks without straw) and YHWH (“Let my people go”) (Exod. 5:1-9). The plague narratives in Exodus 6–11 constitute a script for dramatic performance of the contest between two narrative accounts of reality, a contest that reaches its denouement in Exodus 8:18 wherein the Egyptians reach their limit—except that the contest persists even after that dramatic limit.²⁹ The contest in the book of Exodus (and thereafter), moreover, is not on level ground. In that narrative and everywhere, the dominant narrative (in this case the narrative of Pharaoh) has the upper hand, enjoying public legitimacy, liturgical reinforcement, and technological superiority. Thus Israel's narrative is characteristically told “from below,” at a disadvantage, mostly by the socially disadvantaged, so that it appears to be “weak and foolish” in the eyes of the world. It is in the nature of the case that Israel, even among its own, must struggle to make the case for the legitimacy and adequacy of its narrative account of the world.

And we, as belated practitioners of that narrative, participate in the same contestation with the same disadvantages, through the same struggle, even when the struggle is a “clash within.”³⁰ Thus we are always being asked, and we ourselves are always asking:

- Is this account of reality historically reliable—did it really happen? The question of course reflects skepticism that is sponsored by a modern historicist rationality. It is a question not asked by serious practitioners or liturgical performers of the narrative. Except of course, we ourselves are double-minded. We ourselves know about historical criticism, about the drift of contemporary scholarship toward a dismissal of any ground for the historicity of this narrative in any of its crucial parts.³¹
- Is it morally acceptable? We ourselves cringe from the violence enacted in the narrative, violence that is either perpetrated by or

authorized by YHWH. We wonder how the God of the narrative could bear the drowning death of the Egyptians or the savage slaughter of the Canaanites.³²

- Is it imaginatively evocative enough for the profound emotional extremities wherein our humanness is adjudicated? The narrative is not much given to empathetic emotional extremes that we face in contemporary life, and we have to ask if ancient offers of agony and ecstasy, of hurt and elation, are adequate for the life we live. Does this cry and this dance ring true among us?
- Can this narrative make us happy? We ask amid the narrative of consumerism that makes a promise about ease, comfort, and convenience that the old narratives do not have in purview.
- Can this narrative make us safe? How could we trust in miracles in the face of real raw power in the world?

The narrative is problematic enough that we can give no easy answers to these serious questions. But we must answer as best we can. The answers we give, I suspect, are most often grounded in a resolve and a certainty that provides answers, but our resolve and certitude do not arise from those sorts of answers. Rather it is the other way round. We have, in ways we do not understand, arrived a priori about loyalty to this narrative account of the world, and in some great measure the answers we give to these questions are in fact irrelevant to our own commitment. And when we answer in what we wish were persuasive ways, we really want our conversation partners to accept in trust what we accept in trust. These are “reasons of the heart” that do not yield syllogistic certainty. The certitude and resolve for us is a gift not thought but known more deeply.

But of course we give the best answers we can muster:

- Is it historically reliable? We refuse modern historicist questions and readily make a distinction between positivistic history and the generative power of memory.³³ We know very well that the text to some great extent has arisen from a later traditioning process and is a social construction. We are quick to point out, however, that the dominant narrative account of military consumerism is a social construction wrought by loud ideologues. And so as fully as care about reliability, we finally assert that whatever may be the “data,” we stake our lives on it, and live, as best we are able, in the world mandated by this narrative.
- Is it morally acceptable? We have found a variety of ways to cope with the moral repugnance of the violence perpetrated

and authorized by God. We rely, generally, on an evolutionary hypothesis that locates such violence in primitive projection and in any case, we say it is human projection. My own response to the question wants to refuse easy answers about evolution and projection to say that the God given here is in the process, obvious in the text, of recovery from real violence.³⁴ And in any case, we say, other competing narratives are more readily committed to violence, notably the narrative of the national security state with its apparent commitment to perpetual war.³⁵

- Can it make us happy? We are able to cite wondrous cases of those who have lived and died in this narrative and have found joy, because the God of this narrative is our heart's true desire. We slightly change the subject, because the outcome is not the happiness conjured by consumer ads; it is the joy that comes of being in sync with one's true character, to come down where we ought to be. We note, moreover, that the dominant narrative does not yield happiness, if the indices of social misery are a measure of what that narrative yields.³⁶
- Can this narrative make us safe? The practitioners of this narrative are not kept safe by the measure of the world. They are safe only when we fall back into God's providential assurance that the hairs of our heads will be counted and our names will be written in the book of life.³⁷ But then, we say that the dominant narrative is a powerful generator of anxiety and "Security," as in "Homeland" is a mockery and a farce, for such a narrative yields no safety, and we refuse to live perpetually on Orange Alert.

VI

The prophetic preacher, as a child of this narrative, lives in some dis-ease. Because such a child of the narrative is not naïve about the challenges and the risks of the narrative. Such a preacher may entertain all kinds of doubts and misgivings but is capable of a willing, obedient suspension of disbelief. Such hard-won innocence does not pretend or cover up but appeals to a deeper claim that defies the skepticism of modernist rationality:

- Such a preacher knows about social construction of the narrative but does not doubt that there is more here than ideological construction.

- Such a preacher cringes at the violence and moral repugnance in the narrative but knows that at bottom the social process is conflicted and problematic at best.
- Such a preacher has learned to live with the imaginative force of the narrative and finds the self led, perhaps by the Spirit, to see connections between the ancient text and contemporary lived reality. That preacher is aware of the thin artistry of contemporary sitcoms and professional sports and what passes for political discourse and knows that, by contrast, the artistry to the narrative is thick and demanding and addresses us honestly in our unsolved complexity.
- Such a preacher knows that whatever sustainable joy will be had in the historical process will not offer ease, comfort, or convenience but will come from trustworthy fidelity that withstands the challenges of hard times. Thus the “I am with you” of the God of the text and the “I am with you” of the community around this text turn out to yield the only joy that comes in this body of death where we find ourselves.
- Such a preacher knows that the world is filled with threat, danger, and risk, and current talk of “Security” serves mainly to keep us on Orange Alert and inured to the follies of the national security state. The only safety on offer is the embrace of attentive compassion that summons us and calls us by name.

I underscore these deep difficulties with the narrative in order to appreciate the risk of staking our lives on this narrative account of reality. The same difficulties, on a different scale, are a part of life as staked on the dominant reality. But that dominant narrative practice is rarely called to justify itself as is the narrative of the Gospel. Thus the prophetic preacher, with acute sensitivity for pastoral care, is always adjudicating these matters with honest and personal uneasiness.

- In that ancient world, the adherents to this narrative account of the world had to make the case that the YHWH narrative was more adequate than the claims of Canaanite religion, even while fools in their midst continued to say in their heart, “There is no God” (Ps. 14:1). Or better, without such scandalous dismissal, a different kind of denial, “The LORD will not do good, nor will he do harm” (Zeph. 1:12).
- In the world of the early church, the preachers had to make the case that the narrative of crucifixion-resurrection was a more

adequate account of reality, while the official religious leaders, allied with the dominant narrative of the empire, mocked him derisively: “In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, “I am God’s Son.”’ The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way” (Matt. 27:41-44).

- And now the case is yet to be made again for the narrative of emancipation and covenant wrought by an Agent who looks suspect according to the way of the world. The context in which that advocacy is to be made is one in which the dominant narrative is failing before our eyes. The inability of our strong military to have its way in the world, the inability of our strong economy to maintain its strength, perhaps the Gulf oil spill as an icon of a failed narrative of technological self-sufficiency, all together produce an endless round of anxiety that the world guaranteed by that dominant narrative is vanishing while we watch. Consequently, we live in an ocean of anxiety that is now scarcely bearable.

We are, for the most part, double-minded.³⁸ There is hidden deep within most of us, I suspect, a profound tension between these narratives, knowing better than to trust the dominant narrative but having a huge stake in its being true, wanting the gospel narrative to be true but reluctant to speak another language about the world other than the one in which we are palpably invested. It is the hard work of prophetic preaching, I propose, to make that tension explicit, available, and visible in order to permit informed, knowing choices. The reason it is such hard work is that the people with whom we do ministry, in their anxiety, have a huge stake in denial and keeping the tension hidden. And we ourselves share in that hope of keeping the tension hidden, because when it is acknowledged, we are held accountable for the work that is to be done and the decisions that are to be made. Prophetic preaching does not put people in crisis. Rather it names and makes palpable the crisis already pulsing among us. It is for that reason that we have such energy for resistance and denial. The hard work of adjudicating between these narratives is itself energizing. The hard work, in fact, is to keep the tension hidden, work that keeps us exhausted. Peter Berger describes the work of truthfulness as the process through which persons “switch worlds.”³⁹ That has been the work

since the ancient slaves “switched worlds” from that of pharaoh—the world of “cries”—to be the world of YHWH, where there was dancing and singing, “free at last.” The summons of Deuteronomy, the script behind the prophets, is always to “choose,” to “choose life,” to “choose this day whom you will serve” (Josh. 24:15). Such redeciding is the quintessential human task, and we engaged in ministry of Word and Sacrament are the ones given access to that troubled possibility.