NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

From biblical narrative to economic policy

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The following is an abridged version of a talk given July 30 in Cincinnati at the Celebration *Conference on Effective Liturgy.*

In the Bible Israel always has the hard work of transposing its treasured narrative memory into contemporary practice. It keeps treasured narrative memory and contemporary practice together by sustained acts of liturgical imagination. That liturgical imagination, regularly performed, is designed to raise the question from mesmerized children, ?What is this about??

?You shall tell your children that day, ?It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt? ? (Exodus 13:8).

The exchange of child and parent is designed, via Passover, to make a compelling encounter between what is remembered and what is performed.

The treasured narrative memory of Israel is so familiar that we scarcely notice that it is not really a ?religious? memory. It is a political-economic memory about the time when we were slaves in Pharaoh?s Egypt. Israel can remember the oppressive circumstance when we were nothing more than instruments for the acquisitive economics of Pharaoh (Exodus 5:4-19). We were busy making bricks in order to build pyramids that would bestow grand immortality, and busy building granaries where Pharaoh could store and exhibit his economic monopoly as he controlled the world?s food supply. We remember the pain and the sweat and the resentment and the anger and the foul smell of the huts in which we had to live.

We are able to remember that there was a dramatic contest between the intelligence community of Pharaoh (now called ?magicians?) and the daring challenge of Moses, who had no credentials. We had heard about the contest that played to a draw. Some of us trusted Moses, many doubted him and some simply refused. The ones who trusted followed him in that dark night of death, reached the waters and crossed. The memory was sealed as Miriam and the other women danced the dance of YHWH, the God of economic emancipation: ?The Lord will reign forever and ever? (Exodus 15:18).

The complete text of Brueggemann's talk is Here: **From Biblical Narrative to Economic Policy: Economic Crisis and Conversion** [1]. It is a large pdf file and may take some time to download.

We headed out to a new world, and departed Pharaoh. The memory, so vivid to us, culminated at Sinai. We assented, in a blank check, to the new rules of YHWH, because we knew they would be better than the old quotas of Pharaoh (Exodus 19:8). Right from the mountain we heard the holy voice of the covenant speak to us 10 times about the love of God and love of neighbor (Exodus 20:2-17). We pledged our loyalty and in that instant were converted from a company of weary slaves to a people summoned to neighborliness (Exodus 24:3, 7). It was a transformation wrought by the holy power of YHWH, but we gladly signed on.

This is the narrative memory we deeply treasure. We treasure it so much that we teach our kids and we regularly perform it in order to recall why this night is different from all other nights. It is the night of death and of new life. It is the night of departure. It turns out to be the event of abundant bread. And before we finished, the narrative led us to new promises and pledges of loyalty to neighborly justice. The trek from slavery through abundance to covenant is one we made in wonder. And we keep making it, always again in wonder. And every time we perform it well, it is yet again an awesome miracle that we can hardly trust.

Another version

It turns out, for us, that there is a familiar version of that narrative memory shared by Catholics, Protestants, Jews and secularists in the United States. It continues to be a narrative of departure from religious oppression for a better economic opportunity, and the replay features YHWH as the God of liberty and the new community of possibility. We can recite stories about Columbus and the Mayflower and Jamestown and the Pilgrims and the Puritans and the ?city set on a hill,? and we have no doubt at all concerning our national connection to the God of the promised land:

> O beautiful for pilgrim feet,
> whose stern impassioned
> stress
> A thoroughfare for freedom
> beat across the wilder
> ness!
> America! America! God
> mend thine every flaw,
> Confirm thy soul in self-
> control, thy liberty in law!
> O beautiful for patriot
> dream that sees beyond
> the years
> Thine alabaster cities
> gleam, undimmed by
> human tears!
> America! America! God
> shed his grace on thee
> And crown thy good with
> brotherhood from sea to
> shining sea!

We sing this belated version of our Manifest Destiny. It is serious reuse of the older biblical narrative and we do not doubt that the God of liberty and covenantal justice and mercy and compassion continues to be the primal agent in our history. That version was primarily Protestant; we have, however, all appropriated it. We have gathered around it a mix of deep faith and patriotic pride, sure that this radical God willed a revolution in public power that ends in practices of peace and prosperity, with liberty and justice for all.

Erosion, interruption and amnesia

In the Exodus (13th century B.C.E.), Israel had been called by God, chosen to be a holy, peculiar people in the world. But Israel could readily observe that other ways in the world worked very well, often better than their own. They noticed the way of technological religion that they called ?Canaanite,? and the ways of power politics. They wanted, they said, to be ?like the other nations? (1 Samuel 8:5, 20). You could say that energy for their treasured narrative memory slowly eroded over time. Or you could say that the performance of the memory was abruptly interrupted. Either way, it is King Solomon (10th century B.C.E.) who is presented in the Bible as the great eroder or the great interrupter who experimented with a more ordinary way in the world.

Perhaps he learned something of the new way from his own father, David, who is a multivalent figure in ancient Israel. More likely he learned a great deal from his father-in-law, Pharaoh. He learned about bureaucratic administration and about organizational complexity, and about harnessing religion to the aims of power, and about transposing ideology into propaganda into liturgy. The outcome of his new venture was to establish governance in Jerusalem that would rival the other great governances in his world.

The goal of such governance was accumulation. Thus we are told that Solomon accumulated horses and chariots (arms), gold and silver, wives and concubines (1 Kings 10:23-11:3). He accumulated thousands of proverbs, so then he gained a near-monopoly on wisdom (1 Kings 4:29-34). He applied much of the gold he had accumulated to his new temple, which was a structure of aggrandizement for the regime. He borrowed the pattern for the temple from outside Israel. It was a three-chambered complex with degrees of holiness that reflected the stratification of his urban society (1 Kings 6:1-6).

In his new venture of acquisitiveness, moreover, the old, treasured narrative memory was something of an embarrassment and an unwelcome restraint. More specifically, we are told that he ?loved many foreign women? who brought with them to Jerusalem their many gods (1 Kings 11:1). Solomon was a very religious guy, but it was religion that suited his passion for accumulation. And the verdict is rendered: ?For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father, David? (1 Kings 11:4).

That is, he forgot the First Commandment concerning ?no other gods.? He forgot the God who stood behind that First Commandment, the one who ?brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.? He forgot the God of the Exodus and he forgot that Exodus. We may, then, record Solomon as the great forgetter, and note the Solomonic disease of amnesia concerning the old, treasured narrative memory.

The analogue is obvious in U.S. society. Our own reuse of the treasured biblical narrative memory became truncated in more recent times. There were of course occasional reminders of the old memory from the social gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch, Martin Luther King Jr., Daniel Berrigan, Jim Wallis and their ilk. But as the U.S. economy has turned the corner toward imperialism and its companion, consumerism, the narrative has become remote from serious discourse. Because there are other matters to which to attend, matters of market share and natural resources and stocks and bonds and investments and leverage, the fabric of covenantal neighborliness disappeared from the public scene and with it the graces of generosity and hospitality.

There will be a reckoning, says the treasured narrative memory, for rapacious, acquisitive economics. The

model is the disaster that befell Pharaoh in the Exodus narrative. He could not sustain his practice in the face of YHWH?s will for emancipation. In the covenantal judgment on Solomon and his ilk, his reckoning is figured as divine judgment: ?Therefore the Lord said to Solomon, ?Since this has been your mind and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and give it to your servant? ? (1 Kings 11:11).

Crisis and conversion

These three claims provide background for a consideration of the current global economic crisis as a call to conversion:

- A treasured narrative memory of emancipation and covenant;
- An erosion or an interruption of that narrative in the form of accumulative acquisitiveness;
- A reckoning upon such acquisitiveness.

That much is an unargued assumption of a covenantal-prophetic reading of the Bible. But that leaves important questions to face: Is it too late to avert the reckoning? What can be done in the face of the reckoning?

I will focus on the contemporary immediacy (or the immediate contemporeneity) of the treasured narrative memory. Sinai is not an ancient memory; it is rather a current mandate. Moses reiterates the Ten Commandments that then become the ground for the more specific commandments that follow (Deuteronomy 5:6-21). In this extended address, Moses shows how the tradition of covenant is to be practiced in a land of enormous wealth and prosperity. In sum, Moses exposits two programmatic convictions.

On the one hand, the land of well-being and prosperity is enormously seductive; if you are not alert, the wealth of the land will talk you out of our identity. You will forget who you are and you will become simply another affluent Canaanite:

> When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, 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, and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Deuteronomy 6:10-12).

On the other hand, says Moses, the land of Canaan is transformable. That is why the commandments are issued with such urgency. The land that is so prosperous and inviting can indeed be transformed into a viable working neighborhood. That is the import of the commandments that follow. They are specific disciplines to be taken seriously as concrete steps for societal transformation.

The tradition of Deuteronomy itself is an antidote to amnesia, a sustained act of remembering:

> Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6: 6-9).

From Narrative to Policy

There are five specific commandments from the corpus of Deuteronomy that serve to keep the old narrative

memory current, five proposals for policy derived from narrative:

1. Moses provided the conditions for a king in Israel who would administer power in covenantal ways. Negatively, Moses precluded any king who would be an accumulator (Deuteronomy 17:16-17). The king must be unlike Solomon.

2. Moses provided a covenantal characterization of worship, so important because worship is the venue wherein Israel imagines and performs shared life differently. In Deuteronomy 16:1-17, focus is upon the three great festivals of Israel?s liturgical calendar: Passover, Weeks and Booths. The festivals are a performance of blessed materialism in which the community at worship reiterates and emphasizes the intense solidarity between haves and have-nots. The reference to Exodus in the festival of Weeks and the fact that Passover is recital of Exodus shows how the ordering of worship is a reiteration of the treasured narrative. Worship rooted in God?s generosity in creation and God?s emancipation in history intends to evoke the generosity and emancipation of Israel in ways that are congruent with divine generosity and divine emancipation.

3. Moses provides that agriculture should be practiced in communitarian ways: ?When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan and the widow so that the Lord your God may bless you in all our undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this? (Deuteronomy 24:19-22).

The commandment names the three great money crops of Judean agriculture. In each of them it provides that the farmer must leave a residue of the crop in the field for the vulnerable and the disadvantaged, widows, orphans and immigrants. The vision of these commandments is against the more recent 18th and 19th century ?laws of enclosure? that prohibited the poor from foraging on the land of the owners. The commandments provide an alternative to the tight notion of ?private property? that is the bottom line of modern economics, and allows that property held privately is held in the midst of communal reality.

The laws provide access to the communal resources in a concrete way, so that the Exodus narrative produces policy. Every time a farmer leaves a part of the produce for the needy, the farmer is enacting a miniature exodus whereby the neighbor may enjoy a moment of emancipation.

4. Moses provides an alternative way to think about money management. Moses? work is to provide the kind of banking regulations that will assure that the policies and practices of the bank are directed toward the common good. I cite two regulations that subordinate banking practices to neighborly commitments. First concerning usury: ?You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite, interest on money, interest on provisions, interest on anything that is lent ? so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings in the land that you are about to enter and possess? (Deuteronomy 23:19-20).

A second banking regulation concerns securing loans. Obviously they were not yet troubled about subprime loans. What is interesting is the fact that the commandment makes a distinction for the poor who cannot provide loan collateral: ?You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow?s garment in pledge? (Deuteronomy 24:17).

These commandments, moreover, end with a now familiar affirmation: ?Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this? (24:18).

The narrative pushes directly into policy. The entire economic practice of Israel is to reperform in an institutional way the Exodus event, so that Moses envisions an economic emancipation.

5. This notion of reperformance of the Exodus narrative as economic practice is nowhere more evident than in the commandment on the ?year of release? (Deuteronomy 15:1-18), which concerns debt management. This text is commonly regarded as the pivot point of the teaching of Deuteronomy, making the most daring, most demanding and most dangerous requirement in covenantal economics.

The commandment provides that at the end of every seven years there will be a time of debt cancellation. The thought, apparently, is that in the rough and tumble of economics the social fabric is frayed and neighborly relations become skewed. Reaching back to the principle of Sabbath, the commandment provides a time to take a deep breath about the economy and a time to return focus to the neighborhood. The focus of the law is particularly upon the economy of the poor. The law has an eye on the poor who are always on the short end of the economy. In verse 11, Moses asserts: ?Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ?Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land? ? (15:11).

Moses affirms that the intense practice of debt cancellation makes it possible that there need be no poor in the community: The legal imagination of Israel is permeated with the Exodus. The Exodus is no remote memory. It is a present mandate that requires not only deep resolve but also ongoing imaginative energy that can transpose ancient memory in a simple economy into a durable public practice in a complex economy. Where the narrative is forgotten there will be no covenantal economics. It remains the mandate of the church and the synagogue to supply the memory, but also to supply the imagination that makes a transposition possible from narrative to policy, from ancient to contemporary, from simple to complex. Moses himself is at that task in the tradition of Deuteronomy.

The New Testament

The emancipatory, covenantal memory keeps beating in our ears, requiring that we continue the imaginative task of transposing ancient narrative memory into contemporary policy formation. There is no doubt that the memory continues to resound in the ears of the early church. That is nowhere more evident than in the narrative of Luke from which I will cite four familiar texts:

1. Mary?s song is clearly an act of revolutionary imagination. She sings of the economy and imagines a turn of affairs at least as radical as the year of release: ?He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty? (Luke 1:52-53).

2. When Jesus is in the wilderness, the tempter comes to talk him out of his vocation. The tempter is for Jesus a seduction as was the land of Canaan to the Israelites, also a seduction from vocation. It strikes me as most important that in each of Jesus? responses to the tempter, his reply is a quote from Deuteronomy, for Deuteronomy is the teaching tradition that most powerfully resists the tempter.

3. In the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus quotes the book of Isaiah concerning ?the year of the Lord?s favor? (Luke 4:19). That quote from Isaiah 61 concerns the Jubilee year, the ?year of release? writ large. The quote suggests that Jesus is to enact that ancient commandment, thus reiterating the economic revolution whereby the narrative was to become new policy.

4. The early Pentecostal church became a living sign of the new covenantal economy: ?All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people? (Acts 2:44-47).

I have proceeded in my argument by way of analogy: I have suggested an analogue between the foundational

narrative of Exodus-Sinai and the primal narrative of U.S. society. I have suggested an analogue between the accumulative acquisitiveness of Solomon and the accumulative acquisitiveness of U.S. society. In both cases the accumulative impulse has jeopardized the social fabric. I have suggested an analogue in terms of reckoning, between divine judgment and economic collapse. I have entertained the thought that they are fundamentally synonymous, whether or not expressed in supernaturalist language.

It remains now to consider how the imaginative summons of the tradition of Deuteronomy could serve, by analogy, as an antidote to amnesia in our society. I do not underestimate the difficulty of moving from Deuteronomy to our complex economic crisis. And yet, I suggest that Deuteronomic imagination concerning neighborliness and the restoration of the neighborly fabric is exactly central to biblical faith and exactly urgent in our time and place. It remains for the faithful church to muster imaginative interpretation to make the case for a neighborly economy.

There are two aspects of such a task:

First, the public agenda of such a church is to bear witness to a neighborly economy that is an alternative to a market economy of competitive devouring. What needs to be championed is how the economy can be ordered to serve the neighborhood.

Second, I believe that that there is an in-house task for the church. There is a huge amount of nurturing and education to be done to see that the practice of a neighborly economy is the primal agenda of the Gospel news. This has been so since the Exodus. Jesus, moreover, was not crucified by the empire because he had odd views on sexuality. He was executed because he challenged the socioeconomic-political power arrangements of his time and place.

We are in a moment of acute readiness for such remembering and reimagining.

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