Alien witness: How God's people challenge empire

by Walter Brueggemann in the March 6, 2007 issue

For complex historical and religious reasons,Americans have found it easy to view the U.S. as the “new Israel,” the carrier of God’s mandates in the world. This view has led to an expansive notion of the nation’s “manifest destiny” and to all manner of initiatives under the general rubric of America’s exceptional character and mission.

A close reading of the Bible might suggest that the U.S., rather than being “God’s Israel” in the world, occupies the biblical role of empire, whether that of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon or Persia. If we entertain that connection, then we may also entertain the idea that God’s people in the U.S. are assigned the role that is played in the Old Testament by ancient Israel, the role of being critically engaged with the empire without forgetting or compromising its own distinct identity.

Clearly, there were those in Israel who signed on with the empire; but they were not the ones who were the wave of the future for God’s people. The ones who mattered in the long run were those who kept their critical distance, who regularly reminded the empire of that which it wanted to forget: that human power is penultimate, that there are limits to the power of empire, and that power finally is judged according to its enactments of mercy, compassion and justice.

The story of Joseph in the book of Genesis serves as a counterexample to the primary mode of Israel’s role in the face of empire. Joseph not only interprets Pharaoh’s dream, which is a predictable dream of scarcity in the empire (Gen. 41:14-32), but nominates himself as one “discerning and wise” who can organize the imperial response to the nightmare (v. 33). The phrase *discerning and wise* bespeaks a well-grounded pragmatism that knows how the world works.

With his self-nomination accepted and affirmed, Joseph formulates a policy that is aimed at overcoming the nightmare of scarcity and remedying the empire’s anxiety. It is a policy of monopoly (Gen. 47:13-26). The reach of empire toward monopoly,

based on a preoccupation with scarcity, is the story line of this narrative as it is the story line of every empire that seeks more—more land, more people, more taxes, more power, more influence, more oil.

Once he has all the food in hand, Joseph's strategy is to treat it as a weapon; he trades food for the peasants' money, then for the peasants' livestock (their means of production), then for the peasants' land, and finally for the peasants' bodies—they are made into slaves. So totalizing is the imperial narrative that the peasants express gratitude for their condition: "You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be slaves to Pharaoh" (Gen. 47:25).

The narrator expresses no surprise at this course of events, but surely we sense the profound irony of the story: Joseph, son of Jacob, an Israelite, has taken the lead in initiating a royal monopoly. So effective is Joseph that only four chapters later, in Exodus 1, his own people share in the subjugation of the empire. For that reason, Leon Kass can speak of the "Egyptianization" of Joseph, or we may say the "imperialization" of Joseph, who succumbs to the imperial account of reality and submerges his Israelite identity into the totalizing horizon of Pharaoh. It is not necessary here to trace the end of the Israelite account of Pharaoh's empire beyond noticing that he was overthrown because the God of the peasant-slaves will not finally be mocked or disregarded (Exod. 14-15). In the Exodus narrative, Pharaoh has many chances to accommodate his slave class; he cannot do so, however, because he is so attached to his status.

A very different narrative appears in the book of Daniel. The figure of Daniel is affirmed as a model for how to negotiate with the empire and also maintain one's Jewish identity. Daniel 1 introduces the reader to Daniel's passionate faith: he accepts a civil service assignment in the empire but refuses, in the training program, to eat the junk food (Dan. 1:8) of the empire (anticipating Jesus' warning against "the yeast of Herod" in Mark 8:15).

After that act of resistance, Daniel replicates the work of Joseph: he interprets King Nebuchadnezzar's nightmare when the imperial intelligence apparatus fails to decipher a message from heaven. In this account Daniel is celebrated not as "discerning and wise," as was Joseph, but rather as "endowed with a spirit of the holy gods" (4:18). The phrasing may suggest that Daniel at the outset was rooted more fully than was Joseph in his own tradition and identity.

In any case, Nebuchadnezzar's dream is not unlike Pharaoh's. He dreams of a violent dismantling of imperial power that has become excessively arrogant and undisciplined. Like Joseph, Daniel is asked by the empire's king what to do. While Joseph had urged a policy of royal monopoly, Daniel makes a response that is congruent with his membership in the community of Israel. His response is so Jewish that it must have sounded very strange to the empire: "Therefore, O king, may my counsel be acceptable to you: atone for your sins with righteousness, and your iniquities with mercy to the oppressed, so that your prosperity may be prolonged" (Dan. 4:27).

Daniel's response is not to accommodate the empire but to insist on the nonnegotiable character of life in God's world. His premise is that the empire has sinned and that appropriate action must be taken for atonement of sin. The empire is answerable.

At the end of his response, Daniel issues the quintessential Jewish mandate, "Mercy to the oppressed." What a mouthful! The empire has not noticed those whom it had oppressed in its expansionist pursuit of monopoly. Or if it has noticed, it has not assumed that the plight of the oppressed requires any intentional response, the oppressed being without right or entitlement or even identity. The claim of mercy must be a stunner to an empire that is not accustomed to anything so "soft," so human, so risky. The simple mandate of Daniel, of course, directly contradicts the imagined ultimacy of the empire.

In chapter 4 all the dreamed-of threats against the empire are realized. In fact, the empire becomes (and here the term is precise) crazy; sanity ("reason") returns to Nebuchadnezzar only when the empire recognizes its penultimacy and the need to yield to the ultimacy of the "Most High," which leads to a doxology in which the empire concedes its own penultimate role (vv. 34-35). This narrative holds out the possibility that empire may indeed yield to the High God and may return to sane power. But without sanity before God and mercy before the oppressed neighbor, there is no chance for "prosperity" (4:27).

The word *mercy* invites us to consider one other text, again concerning Nebuchadnezzar. Isaiah 47 offers a prophetic philosophy of history that provides a clue to the way in which faith may be attested positively in the face of empire. YHWH speaks:

I was angry with my people,
I profaned my heritage;
I gave them into your hand,
you showed them no mercy;
on the aged you made your yoke
exceedingly heavy.

This poetic vision from Second Isaiah concedes that Yahweh gives the empire permission to act against God's own people. The unleashing of the ferociousness of the empire is, so the poem asserts, by divine intention. We are, however, stopped short by the line, "You showed no mercy." There is the word we heard on the lips of Daniel. The empire was expected to be merciful even to those who were vulnerable and subject to imperial domination.

The dream mandate to Nebuchadnezzar makes no mention of mercy. I should imagine, moreover, that Nebuchadnezzar would have protested to the prophetic poet or directly to YHWH: "You never said anything about mercy!" Of course not! It does not need to be voiced. Mercy is implied. It is always the will of the creator God; anyone who comes to power must know this, because it is the creator God who gives sovereignty "to whom he wills" (Dan. 4:20). And therefore, says the poet Isaiah, because Nebuchadnezzar did not know the one thing that empires must know—that God wills mercy— his empire is under judgment and must soon be dismantled.

Of course, these poetic and narrative ruminations are no more than wistful traces of a faith that imagines the world differently. But it is exactly such traces that were entrusted to Israel, to the ironic narrator in Genesis, to the storyteller in Daniel, to the poet in Isaiah. This community is equipped only with narrative, story and poem. It proceeds by irony and by otherness. But the community persists long past empire, for empire in its arrogant autonomy has its day then ceases to be; empire never seems to learn that brutal expansionism has no future.

The drama of empire and church can be illuminated by the anthropological studies of James C. Scott. Scott suggests that in oppressed peasant communities the peasants maintain a "hidden transcript," a coded account of reality that is not public or known by the overlords, an account that tells the truth about social reality and that regularly subverts the pretentious posturing and oppressive policies of the

powerful. The hidden transcript empowers the vulnerable in a way that may eventually defeat the false script of the overlords.

After thinking about Nebuchadnezzar and reading Scott, it occurred to me that the hidden transcript of the church in the U.S. empire takes the form of subversive resistance: bearing witness against the arrogant autonomy of the U.S. empire with its shameless militarism and its aggressive economic expansionism. That hidden script is one that we utter and enact every time we take part in liturgy, whereby we imagine the world differently. In that hidden script we regularly confess:

- that Jesus Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate and was crucified, dead and buried; and on the third day rose again from the dead;
- that he showed how broken bread is ample nourishment;
- that he showed that poured-out wine is the nectar of new life;
- that we anticipate the coming regime, for to none other belongs “the kingdom and the power and the glory.”

In the Christmas story we remember that Jesus was born just as “Caesar” (the emperor) sent out a decree. On Good Friday we participate in the echoes of the crowd, “We have no king but Caesar [the emperor].” Caesar is everywhere in the narrative. The emperor is highly visible and powerful. But the community gathered around Jesus dares to commit itself to that alternative narrative that

he was crucified,
he is raised to new life,
he will come again in power.

This is the mystery of faith, not to be “explained,” but to be uttered in the face of the empire.

The community of God’s people never has it easy in the empire. But that community never lives anywhere else. In such a context, life in faith requires irony, whimsy and shrewdness; but it also requires resolve not to give in on what constitutes ultimacy.

It is always difficult to imagine how mercy can penetrate the totalizing narrative of the empire. There seems not much that the church can do given the mess and the

shrillness of ideology. Except that the church can do everything. It can tell the truth of the real world against the imagined world of the empire. It can attest that empires will never do well by embracing nightmares of scarcity.

The church begins that task by learning to read and hear the text. The meaning of the hidden transcript is not available to the empire, but that is its subversive wonder. The one at the center of the hidden transcript said, in giving encouragement to his disciples: “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Luke 10:21-22).

Luke goes on to say: “Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, ‘Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it’” (10:23-24).

The church gathered around Jesus is that body that sees and knows what is not available to kings and to the intelligence community. What a risky marvel is entrusted to the church. It all revolves around the strange term *mercy*, a practice that precludes the lethal habits of the empire.