THE OLD TESTAMENT AS INTERRUPTION:
EXPANDING JOHANN BAPTIST METZ’S “ISRAELITE-BIBLICAL PARADIGM”

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INTRODUCTION

I once heard Johann Baptist Metz described as a “guerilla warfare theologian.” What they meant by this was that Metz would sneak up on a particular theological issue, launch a devastating attack, then retreat back into the jungle as quickly as he appeared without much further explanation.\(^1\) If Metz’s theology is an exercise in “guerilla warfare” then it would seem a thesis on Metz must be an attack that lasts an even shorter duration, an aerial assault, perhaps, where the attack is commenced before one even hears the sound of the approaching jet.

Tactical metaphors aside, it would hardly be fitting to present a thesis on Metz, a theologian of narrative beyond compare, without including some form of narrative within the study itself. Thus, I pray the reader to permit me a brief autobiographical flourish.

I came to Metz’s work as a student attempting to gain experience working with Catholic theology for no other particular reason than for deepened background. I was predominantly interested in Old Testament interpretation at the time and hoped simply to be as skilled as possible in all areas of theology to draw the maximum amount of connections possible. Yet, I was captured, unexpectedly, by his writings predominantly because I heard in him the same urgency that I felt in myself when I interacted with everyday churchmen. For Metz, the typical bourgeois Christian, a child of “the still- or

postmodern world,”² is missing something integral to understanding and participating in the life of Christ. They are not even aware they are missing it. They are alienated from biblical faith by the very type of thinking they have embraced to get them as close as possible to biblical faith. In short, they have accepted banal, bourgeois Christianity, a child of the Enlightenment, but have missed the true, dangerous (because powerfully prophetic) Christian faith.

As a bourgeois Christian, I wholly identified with this feeling of loss, a feeling of utter distance between our theology on the one hand and our practice on the other. I saw that this was a deficiency not in our Christ but in our Church, yet how to heal the wound I could not begin to discern. Metz touched even on my specific worry. Still, while I agreed with Metz that the crisis was predominantly a crisis of Christian institutions, I felt that the bourgeois Christian was missing a key part of the message itself, which is the only way home from the long dark brought on by dysfunctional institutions. This key part of the Christian message was the Old Testament. It was not that they were missing the Old Testament entirely, as though the Jeffersonian Bible had suddenly been on the resurgence. Rather, the typical Christian was wholly incapable of reading the Old Testament as anything other than a maze with a prize at the end: a maze whose grid they had to push through, using various available hermeneutical strands, in order to emerge at the finish to find their prize—the prophetically predicted Messiah, Jesus Christ. Metz saw this as well, and dealt with, if ever so briefly, the need to recover the Old Testament within Christian theology. There was a time, perhaps, when Christian theology could have deceived itself

into believing that it could do without serious engagement with the Old Testament. Metz could not allow such a deleterious assumption to continue, particularly in light of that crisis which became so integral to his overall project—the Holocaust.

From these concerns emerges the primary focus of this thesis, what Metz calls the “Israelite-Biblical Paradigm.” The Israelite-Biblical Paradigm is a perfect example of a Metzian guerrilla attack. Metz explains the paradigm in a small matter of pages only to sneak away, leaving an incredibly protean concept still on the table. In what follows I want to take up this paradigm and use it as a generative mechanism for filling out Metz’s theological project to an even greater extent. Such further work is necessary because Metz left open an aspect that must be filled. Metz established irrevocably the necessity of memory and narrative as constitutive Christian practices for protecting and fostering true human subjectivity. The single most important mechanism of Christian memory is what Metz calls the “dangerous memory of Jesus Christ.” The problem is that a Christian theologian after both Marcion and Auschwitz must utilize the entire Christian memorative arsenal. This means that the memories and narratives of the Old Testament must serve an equally formative role in the constitution and protection of human identity within theology.

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3 Metz, A Passion for God, 63-69.

4 We will treat this important concept in more depth below. For now see Johann Baptist Metz, Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 2007) 87-96.

5 I use the term “equally” here to indicate that the problem we must combat is the Marcionite temptation within Christian theology to privilege the New Testament over the “Jewish” elements of the New Testament itself and the Old Testament in general. This is not to say that Metz is not correct to emphasize Christological priority in the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ, nor do I wish to suggest by using the term “equally” that
What I am not arguing is that Metz himself did not see this fact. I believe the Israelite-Biblical Paradigm is his attempt to begin to correct that tendency to ignore the Old Testament as a key part of Christian memory and narrative within Christian theology. ^6 Yet, like some of his greatest insights, Metz leaves the Israelite-Biblical Paradigm only as a provocation towards further theological reflection. This present work, then, will seek to flesh out an account of the Old Testament as interruption of Enlightenment thinking and, thus, as dangerous memory. The Old Testament interrupts three key aspects of Enlightenment thinking: the denial of death, the denial of tragedy, and the denial of bounded time. By carefully considering these three denials I shall seek to further the Israelite-Biblical Paradigm, which fundamentally does not allow us simply to gloss over human suffering through a quick “resolution” of the problem. The Israelite-Biblical Paradigm, like the crucified One, directs the question of suffering back to God and imminently expects the coming resolution.

Lastly, I shall examine what sort of dangerous memory the story of Israel might be in the Church’s modern context. Contrary to the common trend of liberation theology and even Metz himself, the dangerous memory of Israel is not the story of the Exodus, or, put

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^6 Metz clearly recognizes this discrepancy within Christian theology, before detailing the Israelite-Biblical Paradigm, when he commemorates Ernst Bloch in *Faith in History and Society*. According to Metz, Bloch’s writings, “recall the ‘apocalyptic wisdom’ that rings through in his thought, a wisdom that for him grew especially out of those Jewish traditions that in my view have for all too long been blocked off in Christianity.” Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 156.
more accurately, the entire content of the dangerous memory of Israel cannot be limited solely to the Exodus account. The dangerous memory of Israel is the story of a rise and fall, of a transition from oppressed to oppressor and, ultimately, to exile. This memory becomes dangerous for the Church when applied as self-critique. It is the story that the Church is caught up in to an extent that it has yet to realize and, for that reason, yet to resist fully.

Finally, I would pray the reader again to indulge me, this time for a parable. It is perhaps more like a nightmare. I once dreamt that the church was trapped inside Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre. We were Rochester. We were enthralled at the beauty and plainness of Jane Eyre. She made everything clear for us, offering us our true salvation. Yet, we feared what (indeed, whom) we had locked up in our attic: the wildness of Bertha. The seemingly irreconcilable contrast between the two was unnerving. So we kept her locked up in our attic, away from our theology, our sermons, and our liturgy. We still had to answer quite a few awkward questions about her. Two creation accounts, incest, genocide, and many others like them plagued us. But we knew what we had to do. We shored up our defenses, kept a resolute face, and gave the best answers we could. Or we simply talked about Jane enough that more often than not we forgot our questions. Yet, we still hear Bertha's howls in the night, and we all know the horrible truth—that she will one day break free only to burn our house to the ground. Perhaps we already smell the smoke, and its scent is tinged with something much fouler than wood.
CHAPTER I

Political Theology and the Israelite-Biblical Paradigm

If we stay with the above allegory we might think of Metz as one who has also smelled the smoke and is now sounding the alarm. Metz’s entire theological project is shot through with the language of crisis. This is the crisis of the rise of the bourgeois subject, which for Metz threatens the very foundations of Christian theology and praxis. This crisis arose from the Enlightenment, or, more accurately, it arose from the attempt to attain what Walt Lowe has called “ready-made enlightenment,” or as my teacher Bruce Morrill likes to say, a sort of “enlightenment on the cheap.” For his part, Metz is not attempting a retrenchment of theology over and against the process of the Enlightenment, as the Neo-Scholastics before him were wont to do. Instead, Metz’s project is a “theological enlightenment of the Enlightenment,” an attempt to inform the generative elements within the Enlightenment program via a political theology of the subject while throwing light on the destructive elements within her—what the Frankfurt School called the “dialectic of the Enlightenment.” This present work shares Metz’s goal of a “theological enlightenment of the Enlightenment” but will attempt, following due consideration of Metz’s critique, to do so through the lens of his suggestive Israelite-Biblical Paradigm. For in order to undertake

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8 Metz, Faith in History and Society, 48.

9 See Max Horkheimer & Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum, 1993).
the latter, it is first necessary to review the way in which Metz outlines the crisis of the Enlightenment so as to set up his positive, political theology of the subject. He describes this crisis in six points, an analysis warranting rehearsal here.

**The Modern Subject in Crisis**

*Privatization*

The true apex of the crisis is the trend towards privatization after the Enlightenment. Privatization here refers to the process by which the new heir of society, the bourgeois subject, could no longer find any implements to sustain society within religious traditions. It is the principle of exchange, not religious tradition, that grounds and sustains bourgeois society. Exchange becomes primary concomitant with the rise of technical reason within Enlightenment thinking. Technical reason came to prominence as the form of practical reason that sought to achieve its ends by converting the means to said ends into calculable entities so that they might be more easily manipulated into a solution. As a result, the only things that have value are those with exchange value, those entities that demonstrate replacement value to instrumental reason. This principle took such a hold of modernity that anything which “did not contribute directly to the functioning of this bourgeois exchange society, retreated more and more into the sphere of the private.”

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11 Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 49.
such, anything utterly devoid of exchange value becomes relegated, something unessential to fulfilling the “primary need[s]” of society itself.

Religion is just such a valueless entity in the mind of the bourgeois subject. While the exchange of private property offered the new subject autonomy and security, religion had nothing to contribute to the stabilization of social life. Religion lost all exchange value in the eyes of instrumental reason and was hence discarded to the whims of individuals. Yet, by giving themselves over to the principle of exchange the bourgeois were themselves lost, as instrumental reason converted them just as swiftly as it had religion into calculable entities. Whereas religion once affirmed the values of human beings qua human, the principle of exchange sought some sort of value, a do ut des, which they do not possess, or at least cannot prove they possess. The principle of exchange, the stalwart of Enlightenment autonomy, is actually the primary mechanism by which the Enlightenment undermines its own goal.

Tradition

Tradition faces a similar crisis when it encounters the ideals of exchange society. Yet, it is further attacked from another front—the rise of historical knowledge. As the Enlightenment engenders “historicism,” religious tradition is absorbed by the long and, more importantly, calculable chain of history. For when the bourgeois subject wishes to interact with tradition she does not seek a formative truth for both private and public life. Rather, the rise of historical knowledge has created an occasion to “relativize” tradition within the infinite plethora of opposing worldviews. To top it off, there is no way to claim “objectivity or normativity” for any particular tradition, for these entities are now swallowed up in the non-objective sea of historical knowledge. Tradition becomes simply a
decorative aspect of Enlightenment reason. It helps to make arguments seem rococo, but if it ever hinders the Enlightenment project, standing in the way of the technological goals of progressive society, it is tossed aside as quickly as it was taken up.

The expendable nature of tradition is nowhere more apparent than in bourgeois society’s relation to the dead. The Enlightenment cast an “unremittingly effective social spell”\(^{12}\) upon society that prevented a culture capable of mourning. The dead are the paragon of those who lack exchange value. Mourning for and attentiveness towards the dead will give us nothing in return. As such the bourgeois is forbidden mourning for and any sort of “community of feeling with” the dead.\(^ {13}\) This is essential for Metz because the loss of this sort of community, a community in which memory occupies a central place, equals a loss of an aspect of life that fosters the processes by which human beings make themselves into subjects. The foundering of tradition threatens not just religions but the concrete identity of human persons as well. The “critical consciousness” which the Enlightenment was seeking to impart to all humanity actually had its grounds in memory.\(^ {14}\) By undermining tradition and its grounding in memory, the Enlightenment undermines the very consciousness necessary for the free use of reason. Once again, the Enlightenment shows itself to be self-defeating.

*Authority*

In principle, the notion of authority, particularly religious authority, begins with a presupposition of inequality among individuals. The authoritative one is superior to the

\(^{12}\) Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 51.

\(^{13}\) Ibid.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 52.
one under their authority. However, the principle of exchange dictates that all are equal partners in the economic landscape. The attributes of the subject are leveled out by technical reason, which only sees holders of commodities to be traded, this for that. The notion of authority loses its holding power within post-Enlightenment society.

This is a crisis not because the Enlightenment banishes the foundations of aristocratic or oligarchic domination but because bourgeois society throws out the “salvific” element of authority along with the former. Just as with tradition, there is something constitutive of human identity in authority namely, the authority given to suffering—an authority within which is inherent the affirmation of all men and women as subjects. By embracing the Enlightenment the bourgeois secured their freedom from tyrannical authority, but in so doing they alienated themselves from that very element of authority that protected their identities and the identities of others as subjects. Without a notion of authority suffering had to be swept under the rug, as it were. Neither suffering nor tradition could claim any sort of authority, and in eroding the foundations of these two concepts the bourgeois secured their freedom from tyranny while also ensuring that neither of these two concepts could offer them their saving elements.

(Metaphysical) Reason

In many ways the Enlightenment was an attempt to enrich the life of the subject. Nowhere was this tendency more apparent than in the hopes of Kant that people would break free from their “self-incurred tutelage” and exercise the use of their own reason. Beyond Kant, there was also the rise of Marxist critique which saw all reason as socially

15 Ibid., 53.

and politically determined.\(^{17}\) No Reason was ultimately completely objective; all arguments are conditioned by the social and material forces behind their composition. Kant, though not materially oriented, produced a similar move with the rise of practical reason over and against pure reason. While pure reason had to be reigned in from the fantasies of objectivity, practical reason allowed for the fullness of (moral) subjectivity to flourish.

Yet, like all of the other elements this had deleterious consequences. The problem is that while practical reason sought to provide rational grounds for all subjects, the critique of metaphysical reason and the call to use one’s own reason was directed solely at those who were already mature, i.e. the bourgeois subject. The Enlightenment was nothing more than the rise of a new elite, an elite that already had access to the means necessary to pursue Enlightenment ends. Those without property or education had no access to reason and thereby had no further recourse for establishing their identity. Enlightenment reason sought to liberate but ultimately succeeded in establishing nothing more than a praxis of “domination.”\(^{18}\) Reason became synonymous not with the emancipation of individuals but with the domination of nature and other human beings.

_Crisis for Religion_

Having relegated religious belief to the private sphere and undermined all metaphysical judgments, it is no surprise that the final element in crisis is religion itself. Yet, just as Enlightenment valued tradition for its decorative use so the Enlightenment also sought to maintain religion in some form. This led to the rise of natural religion.

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\(^{18}\) Metz, _Faith in History and Society_, 56.
within the bounds of reason alone sought to recover for the subject the benefits of religion without compromising the work of Enlightenment reason on metaphysics. One could certainly still believe in God, but that was because the existence of God was a rational truth, demonstrable by many forms of rational argumentation. Certainly, much of the positive aspects of Christian religion would have to be jettisoned, but Christianity at its core, so claimed the Enlightenment, was the closest one could get to the purity of natural religion.

Ultimately, no matter the intention of the critic, whatever critique was leveled against metaphysics would inevitably rebound upon religion itself. In this way, the critique of metaphysical reason as politically and socially conditioned came to be a critique of the political and social biases of all religion. Not only was Christianity based on a bygone branch of philosophy it was also shot through with a particular political and social standing, compromising its objectivity and, thereby, its claim to universal truth. Religion in this sense becomes nothing more than “priestcraft,” clever and coercive ideology used to ensure maintenance of material and social standing. Natural religion may have left something to be desired, but at least it could claim universality, having no interest in maintaining social status.

This claim to objectivity and universality, however, is precisely the problem with natural religion. Natural religion, at its core, is nothing more than the religion of the new elite. It is just as politically and socially conditioned as any other religion. Only the bourgeois subject could truly participate in natural religion, and even then the religion would be, appropriately, an extremely private affair. This cut the constituents of natural

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20 Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 57.
religion off from any contact with the experiences of those suffering and prevented any true resistance against such instances of suffering through this selfsame privatization. Natural religion produced the same sort of contradiction from which the new elite sought so desperately to flee—a set of beliefs irrevocably tied to the material and political conditions of the believer.

*The New Political Theology*

Having elucidated the current crisis, Metz seeks a new way forward through the new political theology. Its principles are meant as a critique and corrective—a critique of the bourgeois subject and a corrective to the many ways that the thinking and rationale of the bourgeois have infected Christianity. Again, this is not a banishment of the Enlightenment from Christianity. Rather, it is an attempt to do the hard work of the Enlightenment itself, the work the bourgeois were unwilling to do. Metz wants the true principles of the Enlightenment to hold: the division of public and private spheres, the secure autonomy of the subject, and the primacy of practical reason. Yet, he wants to heal that self-alienation from Christian praxis that has so wounded the bourgeois, those tendencies within the dialectic of Enlightenment that dissolve subjects into formless calculations of technical reason.

The only way to do so is through a theological recovery of both genuine subjectivity and praxis. We need a theology that gets at the root of what it means to become fully human, that *interrupts* the calculating reason of the Enlightenment via the plight of real human beings suffering in history. In other words, we need a practical fundamental theology: practical in that theology must now recognize that a retreat into pure theory or utterly interiorized belief will lead to precisely the same foundering as the dialectic of
Enlightenment; fundamental in that this sort of theology is concerned with protecting and engendering those very concepts and practices which allow human beings to become and remain subjects in the presence of God. Critical to Metz’s project, then, is a thorough comprehension of the terms “praxis” and “subject.”

Practical Subjectivity

Praxis

The new political theology is done under the “primacy of praxis.” What precisely does this mean? The primacy of praxis represents for Metz the true “Copernican shift” of the Enlightenment. It is the shift from pure to practical reason in Immanuel Kant coupled with the dialectic of theory and praxis that arose in Marx’s work. All in all, it means that a system of theology cannot be dictated by purely theoretical ideas which are then melded onto one’s personal, moral life. Rather, the ideas themselves are linked to practices such that they are intelligible through the practices themselves.

Take for example Christology. For Metz, the idea of God is essentially a practical idea. In that case, Christology done under the primacy of practice means that the Christian cannot know Christ without following Christ. Without practiced discipleship, Christ is unintelligible to theology. Praxis has its own “intelligibility,” it produces and alters knowledge in the same way as theory.

21 Ibid., 61-70.

22 See also Johann Baptist Metz, Followers of Christ: The Religious Life and the Church (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).
In order to draw on this source of intelligibility theology must be open to the experiences and stories of both the biblical traditions and the ancient and contemporary traditions of the Church. It is through the central stories of following Christ, “[m]etanoia, conversion, exodus,”\(^23\) that our theory and theology must be constructed. This means that the idea of God is not simply a theoretical idea and that narratives are not simply quaint delivery mechanisms for communicating concepts. The idea of God, and thereby Christian theology itself, has a narrative-practical structure. Without narratives focused on practices the ideas and theories of Christian theology are nothing more than ephemeral and ineffective or, worse, susceptible to ideological manipulation by others’ practices of reason.

Finally, praxis has a “pathic structure,”\(^24\) pathic because Christian praxis must include more than ethical actions. It must include suffering. Why? Because orienting praxis towards suffering prevents praxis from being based upon the trend within Enlightenment thinking which focuses on the domination and control of nature. By binding suffering to praxis Metz prevents the sort of self-alienating practices required in order to dominate nature. The pathic structure of praxis is necessary if praxis is to lead towards genuine human subjectivity. If not, then we will, like the bourgeois subject, sacrifice our own identity through our attempts to dominate nature, those practices which force us out of history and nature.

Two key concepts then emerge for Metz. A narrative-practical Christianity requires narrative, obviously, but also “remembering” if the pathic structure of praxis is to be maintained. We must attend not just to narrative in general but to specific narratives of

\(^{23}\) Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 62.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 67.
human subjects and their suffering. This means that our truth cannot be a truth without relation to those who have suffered, particularly to those who have been lost and vanquished in history. Truth, under the primacy of praxis, is therefore only that which is relevant for all subjects, including the dead. God must be a God of both the living and the dead.\(^\text{25}\)

As we can see, these two concepts serve not just the maintenance of accurate theology but also the construction of something much more vital. These two fundamental categories help construct human subjectivity, and it is to this construction that we now turn.

* Becoming Subjects

The goal of Christian theology under the primacy of praxis set against the bourgeois subject of the Enlightenment is the reclaiming and/or reconstructing of human identity. For Metz, the tools to carry out this task are the fundamental concepts of memory, narrative, and solidarity.\(^\text{26}\) These three concepts are essential for the construction of human identity, first and foremost, because they resist any sort of “subjectless theologies”\(^\text{27}\) in which the subject is abstracted *in toto* from history and society.

These abstracted theologies—the prime example being the theology of Metz’s teacher Karl Rahner—fail because humanity must be not simply subjects in relation to God

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 82-84; and Metz, *A Passion for God*, 36.

\(^{26}\) Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 168.

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 71-74.
but also the subjects of “his or her historical processes.”

This is precisely why Metz contends that a practical fundamental theology must be a political theology. Our theology must today present itself as a theory of history and society because it is only through the processes of these entities that human beings may become subjects. In other words, the idea that human beings become fully human in the presence of God is correct only in so far as this process is recognized as occurring within a historical community.

Yet, we cannot reduce this process to history and society alone, as though all that were necessary were a sort of Marxist humanism added onto our understanding of the Enlightenment. Rather, Metz asserts that the only means by which humanity can become subjects is through religion, i.e. through relationship to God. As he contends, “[M]en and women only came to their identity as subjects at all by means of religion, in relationship to their God. It is only in this way that they became subjects of their histories.”

Religion is the chief means by which persons become subjects and protect their identity from the distorting and deleterious processes of the Enlightenment.

Christianity, specifically, supports this goal through three fundamental concepts. Christianity offers a specific memory, the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ, which unites disciples in solidarity. The narrative of Jesus Christ becomes practical through the praxis of discipleship. The follower of Christ is then set free to remember the dead and the vanquished, the poor and oppressed, and to live out their individual identity not over and

\footnote{Ibid., 72. For an in depth study of the relation between Metz’s work and his theological and philosophical influences, including especially the work of his mentor Karl Rahner, see J. Matthew Ashley, \textit{Interruptions: Mysticism, Politics, and Theology in the Work of Johann Baptist Metz} (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998) 170-191.}

\footnote{Metz, \textit{Faith in History and Society}, 77; see also Metz, \textit{A Passion for God}, 36-37.}
against their plight but with them in their brokenness. Through such means, the disillusioned modern is able to become a true human subject and to bring others to the same genuine subjectivity. Here, then, we reach Metz’s ultimate definition of the Christian faith: “The faith of Christians is a praxis in history and society that understands itself as a solidaristic hope in the God of Jesus as a God of the living and the dead, who calls all to be subjects in God’s presence.”

**Making Biblical Connections**

We have thus seen the goal of Metz’s project: to establish Christianity as a praxis in history and society by which all may becomes subjects in the presence of God. The source and norm of this praxis is the three fundamental concepts: memory, narrative, and solidarity. Through these concepts Christian theology creates and judges its praxis. Yet, what we have yet to see is the way in which these fundamental concepts play out in relation to the biblical traditions.

Metz, to say the least, does not treat the biblical traditions as purely decorative or illustrative embellishments upon an already completed theology. The biblical traditions form the narrative-practical backbone of his entire project:

The histories of faith found in the Old and New Testaments are not added on to a humanity that has already been constituted as subjects, superimposed as some sort of superstructure or ceremonial accessory. Rather, they are histories of the dramatic constitution of human beings as subjects—precisely through their relationship to God.  

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30 Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 81.

31 Ibid., 70.
The biblical narratives offer us not simply encouraging words or the means to inspire people to moral action. They offer us the paradigmatic narratives and memories in which we must participate if we are to become and lead others to become subjects in the presence of God. As Metz writes again, “They do not invite one just to ponder, but to follow, and only in risking this Way do they manifest their saving mystery.”32 We become a part of these stories and through our participation we can become subjects in the presence of God in the same way as the characters in the traditions have done so.

The dangerous memory of Jesus Christ is the primary means of participation in the biblical tradition for Metz. We will treat this memory and Metz’s use of the term “dangerous” below, but it is important to note presently something perhaps too obvious, namely that this memory relates solely to the New Testament narrative. As stated above, Metz recognized the dearth of the presence of the Old Testament within his project and Christian theology as a whole. Later, he sought to throw some light on similar resources within the Old Testament narrative through his Israelite-Biblical Paradigm. For our purposes, we will now turn to this dangerous memory of Jesus Christ—its content and its effects on Christian subjects—with an eye towards ways in which we might later discover and utilize similar means to genuine subjectivity within the Old Testament.

32 Metz, A Passion for God, 48.
Dangerous Memory

Remembrancing Jesus Christ

Nothing can be more destructive to the constitution of persons than the destruction of memory. We lose our very identity when our memories are stripped from us. Our will to resist oppression comes to naught without memories from which to draw the means of energizing our efforts. We see this occur often, says Metz, in our present Enlightenment context. Here the bourgeois use memory as a retreat to an “untroubled paradise” in which the past speaks nothing but pleasantries to the future soon to be created by and for the bourgeois. In this way, memory becomes a “false consciousness,” a conception of the past as nothing more than the “good ole’ days” which have no dangerous insights for the present. If we remember in this way we, like the bourgeois, undermine our subjectivity because, as was shown above, we can only remember this way at the expense of the history of suffering. Only by whitewashing this authoritative history may we remember the past as the “good ole’ days,” and by blotting out suffering we are also blotting out the affirmation within the memory of suffering: that affirmation of subjectivity inherent in the ability to suffer.

What we need, and moreover what the Christian religion teaches, is a memory that is dangerous. These are memories in which everything is not alright, memories that interrupt the pleasant quotidian workings of bourgeois history. A dangerous memory is one which speaks to us from the past about our current state. In this way, dangerous

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33 This is J. Matthew Ashely’s translation from the German word Eingedenken. Metz uses this term to connect explicitly the concept of memory to the Eucharist. As Ashley notes, “In German, the adverb eingedenk means ‘in remembrance of,’ and it is used in that sense in the Order of Mass: ‘Do this in remembrance of me.’” See Metz, A Passion for God, 181, n. 10.
memories have a sense of what the future ought to be, they are an instance of “remembering looking forward,”\textsuperscript{34} a memory that opts for a particular sort of future.

In our time knowledge has been reduced to only that which contributes to our control and utilization of nature. Technical reason has a use only for those elements of human experience which aid this hope. Therefore, those aspects of human knowledge that are not conducive to the will of technical reason are downgraded if not discarded. These include some of the most important elements of our identity—things like joy and mourning. History told under technical reason then becomes a history only of the successful, those who have not suffered. Metz calls this sort of history a “history of the victors.”\textsuperscript{35} The downside of this sort of history is that it relegates the vanquished to the dung heap of history—a place in which no subjectivity can be maintained. In short, we lose all contact with the dead and thereby with our ability to mourn for and exist in solidarity with the dead. To keep and protect our human identity Christianity must provide a means by which we may exist in solidarity with the dead. It must narrate a sort of anti-history, a memory of the suffering which protects the identities of those lost to history. Otherwise, we fall into the same self-defeating tendencies of Enlightenment thinking and erode, with each moment of forgetfulness, our own capacity to be subjects.

\textit{Anticipatory Remembering}

For Metz this effort crystallizes in the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ. The story of Jesus is a narrative of suffering which looks forward to a future. It looks forward to,\textsuperscript{34}


\textsuperscript{35} Metz, \textit{Faith in History and Society}, 75.
however, a *specific future*, a future in which all become subjects in the presence of God. The memory of Jesus Christ is a concrete instance of suffering which allows us to anticipate a concrete future for those suffering in history. This keeps the subject from dissolving into a utopian type of history in which humanity in general is redeemed from general suffering by placing the emphasis on the specific situation of the suffering. The dangerous memory of Jesus Christ, therefore, must be a double memory that includes both the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. If we remember nothing but the Resurrection of Christ, nothing but the ultimate victory over death and suffering, then we will simply be establishing a Christian history of the victors in which only those who have triumphed over death are remembered. As Metz puts it, “Whoever hears the message of the resurrection of Christ in such a way that in it the cry of the crucified has become inaudible, hears not the Gospel but a myth of the victors.”

These considerations bring us to a key issue: time. Time under the Enlightenment becomes an empty continuum of endless time. Without limits, time stretches into eternity with only the inevitable processes of evolution to keep life going. The dangerous memory of Christ, however, remembers a very specific future, and it is a future in which God comes so as to end time as we know it. Time is thus revealed as bounded. We remember Jesus through our “imminent expectation” of His return and, thereby, the restoration of God’s justice on Earth. This lends an “apocalyptic sting” to the praxis of Christianity. This apocalyptic sting serves predominantly not to turn the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ into the silver bullet against all concerns of theodicy. The dangerous memory of Jesus

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37 Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 81-82.
Christ can vitalize the Christian life through imminent expectation precisely because it does not offer us an easy resolution to the problem of the suffering. In the person of Christ we both affirm the love and justice of God while also holding to the ultimate question of Christianity: “What is God waiting for?”

The Israelite-Biblical Paradigm

Here we have reached a fitting moment to at last discuss what Metz calls the “Israelite-Biblical Paradigm.” It is fitting to discuss this hear because Metz sees the testimonies of Israel in the Old Testament and later apocalyptic writings as a testimony about the boundedness of time and the inability to easily reconcile questions of theodicy. For his part, Metz details three aspects of this paradigm. He offers these aspects as a “corrective” to the prevailing trend in Christian theology with regard to theodicy.

First, as one might expect, Israel is defined by “historical remembrancing.” Israel’s thought is her remembrance of her history. This sort of “remembrancing” runs counter to the forms of forgetfulness common in Enlightenment thinking. The Israelite-Biblical Paradigm speaks against both the forgetfulness of memory itself, which we treated above, and the forgetfulness brought about by a specific type of remembering: historicism. Historicism remembers perfectly well, but it remembers only those things which have survived. As Metz writes, “[W]hat has disappeared is ipso facto irrelevant and whatever cannot be brought back is in every case insignificant.”

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38 Metz, A Passion for God, 84.
39 Ibid., 65.
Israel is “always on the trail of the forgotten,” meaning that the story of Israel will, like the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ, always interrupt any system that attempts to whitewash history of past suffering.40

Second, Israel is characterized by a particular sort of poverty namely, a poverty of idealizing mechanisms that could shield her from the “terrors and chasms of this life.”41 Israel exists in a fundamental state of vulnerability towards the sufferings of this world. She has no means by which she may forget the evil which has beset her. In fact, Israel’s entire capacity for God can be expressed by this vulnerability, this inability “to let itself be consoled by myths and ideas.”42 In the same way that the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ resists easy resolution to the problem of current and past suffering, so the story of Israel reveals a stance towards God in which the fundamental question “What is God waiting for?” is ever present. Israel expresses its faithfulness to YHWH in its cries of questioning against the theological systems which might try to console her.

Finally, this sort of questioning becomes a type of mysticism, a mysticism of “suffering unto God.” This mysticism is inundated with the poverty of spirit described above, and like that spirit opposes any veins of theology that “know only answers but no disturbing questions.”43 In the prayer traditions of Israel – predominantly the Psalms, Lamentations, and Job – we find an incessant questioning out of the midst of great

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., 66.

43 Ibid.
suffering. There is no attempt to sublate these horrors into some great myth or idealism, but rather simply a directing of these questions towards God. Fear and mourning, pain and tragedy are not stifled here but are the sources and object of their cries unto YHWH.

Consolation is not this mysticism’s object. Suffering-unto-God does not ask for consolation, only for God again. In the same way, Israel cannot coexist with a notion of endless time. Her suffering-unto-God takes the same form as the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ, namely as an “imminent expectation” of the justice of YHWH. Israel is what Metz calls “this-sidedly gifted” in that they are unable to envision YHWH as beyond time. As Metz writes, “Israel…has not...experienced and thought its saving God outside the world, as transcending time, but rather as time’s end, coming toward it and bounding it.”44 Her constant turning of questions back to God, her inability to resolve these questions simply through an alien idealism is what connects Israel to Christ. Jesus’ lament from the cross anchors him firmly in this tradition. As Metz puts it, “In the God forsakenness of the cross,” Christ, like Israel, “affirms a God who is still other and different from the echo of our wishes, however ardent; who is ever more and other than the answers to our questions.”45

Review

We have seen the overall arc of Metz’s theological project towards grounding genuine human subjectivity within a praxis in history and society. Moreover, we have seen how this praxis is grounded in three fundamental concepts – memory, narrative, and

44 Ibid., 82.

solidarity. Finally, we have seen how these three concepts come together in the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ and, to a certain extent, the Israelite-Biblical Paradigm. Yet, it is clear that the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ occupied greater space in Metz’s project even though the Israelite-Biblical Paradigm came to play a vital role. Still, one of the key tides Metz is resisting in his work is the “Marcionite-gnostic temptation” in Christian theology—a key aspect of which is the dereliction of Old Testament within Christianity.\footnote{Ibid., 85.}

While, Metz has done exceptional work on combating the Gnostic aspect of this temptation, the Marcionite aspect seems to be in need of further attention. The dangerous memory of Jesus Christ, while Metz connected it to the Israelite-Biblical Paradigm, can occupy a higher place in Metz’s theological system.

For this reason it is my contention that while Metz sensed the lack of the Old Testament within Christian theology there is still a need to further the Israelite-Biblical Paradigm so that the dangerous memories (if there are any) of the Old Testament may truly stand on equal footing with the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ. Achieving equal footing, in my mind, is the only way to truly combat the Marcionite aspect of the Marcionite-gnostic tendency within Christian theology. To reach this goal, however, we need not look further than Metz’s work. The answer to the crisis of the Enlightenment for Christian theology is not to be found by throwing out Metz’s project and starting afresh. The fundamental assumption of this work is that the resources necessary to answer adequately the challenges of modernity and to maintain the equal standing of the Old Testament tradition are already available to us within Metz’s work. Metz has laid the groundwork and, indeed, already completed a portion of the work through the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ.
that remains is to further the Israelite-Biblical Paradigm in order to reach a place in which the Old Testament functions as the interruption of modernity which it truly is—a dangerous memory.
CHAPTER II

Overcoming the Three Denials: Old Testament as Interruption

The Three Denials: The Frankfurt School & Metz

We have seen above the six central elements of the crisis created by the Enlightenment that Metz identified and how they affect the religious subject. I would like to focus my attention on more general trends within Enlightenment thinking. Specifically, I want to elucidate three denials of the Enlightenment—the denial of death, tragedy, and bounded time. These denials help frame our attempt to connect Metz’s theology with the Old Testament in that these are specific areas of Enlightenment thinking which the Old Testament interrupts. The Old Testament interrupts these denials in a two-fold manner. First, the Old Testament tears through the veneer of Enlightenment thinking as critique. Secondly, the Old Testament offers a counter-proposal to the bourgeois subject by inviting us into genuine, practical subjectivity.

In what follows we shall expound upon these denials through the work of some of Metz’s deepest influences—the critical theories of the Frankfurt school. We will use these thinkers to draw the contours of the three denials. We shall then use Metz’s theological lens to examine key moments in the Old Testament biblical traditions in order to find both the shattering critique and the counter-proposal of genuine subjectivity contained therein. Lastly, we shall conclude by asking what sort of insights these traditions provide us with regards to the notion of Israel as dangerous memory.
Old Testament as Interruption: Fundamental Concepts in Reverse

As I attempted to throw light upon the three denials in my studies, I realized that the three denials themselves correspond to the three fundamental concepts in Metz’s practical fundamental theology: memory, narrative, and solidarity. This is entirely fitting since we have seen that the Enlightenment ultimately undermines that which is fundamental to the construction of human subjectivity and that Metz put forward the three concepts as precisely those elements which must remain central to theology’s attempt to protect and nourish genuine subjectivity. As we examine the three denials we are also moving deeper into the three fundamental concepts, which speak against one of each of the three denials. However, we will move through these concepts in reverse—from solidarity to narrative to memory—as these concepts answer in reverse the damage done by the three denials. Thus, we begin with the first denial of the Enlightenment and the last of Metz’s fundamental concepts: the denial of death and the concept of solidarity.

Solidarity: The Denial of Death

Enlightenment Denial

“Underlying the prevalent health is death.”47 This statement by Theodor Adorno is perhaps the most succinct statement of both the prevailing notion within Enlightenment thinking and the counter-statement made by the Old Testament. It is an undeniable fact that the Enlightenment has lead to prevalent health, at least if we assume the definition of

health as a beating heart, moving bowels, and a median amount of brain waves. Human beings are able to live longer than ever thought possible. Yet, we are faced with the continual problem to which Horkheimer turned our attention in his essay on means and ends.\textsuperscript{48} Enlightenment reason can calculate accurate and effective means ad infinitum, but true and good ends transcend its ability to compute. In our culture of “prevalent health” we, in fact, have not found health at all. We have found a beating heart, but not the thing for which our heart \textit{ought} to beat. The constant critique to our blithe celebration of “prevalent health” is what truly underlies, undercuts, and undermines it: death.

Death is the constant critique of our prevalent health because it swallows up any and all of the final calculations of technical reason. Technical reason’s functioning is dependent upon live data. Once the data has lost its viability it is no longer functional within the calculations, precluding said data from participation in and enjoyment of technical reason’s results. Death, thereby, is the ultimate constant for technical reason. It ensures that its calculations are true since it can only calculate for those to whom its results will be relevant. Technical reason, in a sense, requires and affirms death even in its supposed negation of it. Death, however, is the ultimate critique of technical reason in that technical reason can give no help to the dead and no connection with the dead for the living.

The fact that technical reason’s truths no longer hold as universals upon the dead shows that its truths will always come to irrelevancy.\textsuperscript{49} The goal of objective reason, now a bygone relic, was ends which correspond to a metaphysical order, but the prowess of

\textsuperscript{48} Horkheimer, \textit{Eclipse of Reason}, 3-57.

\textsuperscript{49} For this reason, Metz defined truth itself as “that which is relevant for all subjects—including the dead and the vanquished.” See Metz, \textit{Faith in History and Society}, 69.
technical reason, after the loss of any confidence in metaphysics, is to find the most effective means in order to accomplish a given human purpose. Death makes this latter task impossible as it eliminates the human element from which the purpose emanates. In short, if the focus of technical reason is means and not ends then death will inevitably swallow up the entire process. Therefore, the one thing technical reason must always deny, even though it is an undeniable fact, is that all of its truths will come to utter irrelevance for all subjects due to a single, indubitable fact: all subjects will die.

Within this denial we can again see the ultimately self-defeating dialectic within the Enlightenment: the denial of the human subject itself.

“For every person, with all his functions, society has a stand-in ready, to whom the former is in any case no more than an intrusive occupier of his workplace, a candidate for death....In being seen as no more than the exit of a living creature from the social combine, death has been finally domesticated: dying merely confirms the absolute irrelevance of the natural organism in the face of the social absolute.”

Thus, we see clearly the dysfunctional relation between means and ends: prevalent health cares not for who the subjects are or even that they are, in fact, truly subjects; it cares only for the fact that they are alive. It requires a means through which it may accomplish its purpose but cares not for what sort of ends at which its purposes must aim. Death, accordingly, becomes something as cheap and replaceable as the human subject itself. In fact, it was only through this cheapening of the human subject that death could become something so bereft of gravity. “If the individual whom death annihilates is himself nothing,

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bereft of self-command and of his own being, then the annihilating power becomes also nothing...."51

This denial is maintained and pressed upon us by the culture industry.52 "Under its lens death begins to be comic."53 Death, in the culture industry, becomes an occasion for a punch line or a way to amp up the chase in slapstick comedy. A corpse becomes "a stage prop," an accurate reflection of its true place in the current state of affairs. Through comedy death becomes not only something that is nothing to us but something that is laughable. In the supposed "art" of the culture industry we find this "objective social tendency" becoming "incarnate."54

From here, we can see clearly why technical reason and the Enlightenment entrench themselves in what Metz calls the "history of the victors." Death poses the deepest threat to the Enlightenment’s reasoning power. To deny death is to affirm those who haven’t died as the only relevant subjects of history. For this reason, when posed with the question, "With whom does history empathize?" the Enlightenment will always answer the same way. As Walter Benjamin put it, "The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all rulers and heirs of those who conquered before them....Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying

51 Ibid.
54 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 122.
prostrate.”55 The freedom of the bourgeois subject, his victories of emancipation over the bonds of “self-incurred tutelage,” is accomplished by triumph over those lost to history. The bourgeois subject may only ascend to the heights of freedom and emancipation by climbing on the backs of the dead.

*Biblical-Theological Corrective*

It would be the gravest anachronism if I were to argue that the Old Testament senses this problem of technical reason. The writers of the Old Testament knew naught of Enlightenment thinking or calculating reason. What I want to argue is that within the Old Testament are the resources for mounting a critique of Enlightenment denials in the same way that Metz utilized the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ. In this particular case, we have the means to recover the fundamental concept of solidarity—a solidarity that both looks forward to true liberation for all subjects and looks backward for meaning for the dead and vanquished. Our treatment of solidarity within the Old Testament will seek then to find ways in which the Old Testament interrupts Enlightenment thinking as well as the ways in which the traditions of Israel promote genuine human subjectivity through solidarity among the living and the dead.

Yet, the question with which we are immediately faced is why utilize the Old Testament as a solution to this problem at all? Do we not have in the Resurrected One the ultimate answer to the problem of death? The ultimate hope for all those lost to history? The answer to these questions is “yes and no,” and this ambiguity points to the most troubling facet of the Enlightenment denial of death: the ease with which the Resurrected

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Christ may be coopted into the Enlightenment notion of “prevalent health.” For how could the bourgeois Christian resist utilizing the Resurrected One in such a way? The temptation is too great! The Christ stands as the ultimate paragon of health precisely because he will never die again. Through his resurrected life He has negated death absolutely.

Under this rationale, the Passion becomes a narrative meant to give us nothing more than a sense of God’s love, this dark hour a momentary blip soon to be consumed by the light of the rising dawn. Resurrection sublates Passion. The cry of the Crucified One succumbs to the horror-silencing trumpet blast of Easter morning. There is, of course, a critique of this sort of bastardization of the Son within a solid reading of the New Testament traditions. As Metz himself writes, “Whoever hears the message of the resurrection of Christ in such a way that in it the cry of the crucified has become inaudible, hears not the Gospel but a myth of the victors.” The New Testament itself speaks against this sort of misreading.

And yet, this drastic sort of misreading continues to plague the Church in spite of the numerous attempts to curtail such distortion of the Passion narratives. I would propose that this phenomenon cannot be solved by scholarly correction from above. The way we overcome a tendency inherent in ourselves to receive from the Resurrection accounts a denial of death is by transforming it from within via Scripture itself. We need a source within the biblical tradition not to refute the hope of the Resurrection but rather to give us permission to turn our questions back to God. Crude misreadings of the Gospel would have us slough off our supposed “suffering” and join, with a large toothy smile, the

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56 Metz, A Passion for God, 126.

57 See above, p. 28
triumphant chorus: “He is risen, indeed!” Dangerous memories cut against this half-hearted chant, not because it isn’t true, but because it is being misused and falsified. Within the cry “He is risen indeed” is the cry “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This cry of turning our questions back to God, however, is not original to Jesus. It comes from elsewhere. It comes from the traditions of Israel.\(^{58}\) For this reason, we have an impetus to seek those resources within the Old Testament that will serve as interruption of the Enlightenment and its Christ of “prevalent health.”

There is perhaps no greater of an interruption to the denial of death than Ecclesiastes. The Preacher is left utterly inconsolable at the sight of the universality of death, regardless of personal merit.

And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them....For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool! So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after the wind (Ecc. 2:14-17).\(^{59}\)

The myth that the Enlightenment and technical reason would give to Israel will not console it in light of death. The horror of death and suffering waits to swallow up all meaning, and the cry of the Enlightenment that death is nothing will not console the Preacher.

The book of Job presents further interruption to the debasement of death. Not only does death come for all humanity regardless of merit, humanity continues to suffer even though such a bitter end awaits them. The role of God within such suffering then becomes particularly problematic.

\(^{58}\) See Metz, \textit{A Passion for God}, 67-68.

\(^{59}\) All citations of Scripture in this work are from the RSV unless otherwise noted.
Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He comes forth like a flower, and withers; he flees like a shadow, and continues not. And does thou open thy eyes upon such a one and bring him into judgment with thee? Look away from him and desist, that he may enjoy, like a hireling, his day. (Job 14:1-3, 6).

The Old Testament resists the myth that death is nothing, but it offers us no easy resolutions either. The Old Testament’s attitude towards death is rightly characterized then, to invoke Metz’s phrase, by a “suffering unto God.” The answer for Job to the question of the suffering of humanity doomed to die was simply to turn those questions back to God. In fact, it is precisely the easy resolutions offered by his friends that so torment Job in his grief. The Old Testament, therefore, interrupts Enlightenment in both its denial of death and its tendency towards easy solutions of the problem of death.

It remains, thus, to find ways in which the Old Testament offers us a more genuine subjectivity to answer the denial of the Enlightenment. In what way does the Old Testament offer us the fundamental concept of solidarity to construct a full and practical subjectivity? We are offered this higher subjectivity in that the Old Testament gives us permission to mourn. We are given permission to look upon death in all its horror, in all of its bitterness, and by affirming death in this deep way the Old Testament affirms our own subjectivity. For it is only in gazing fully at the despair of death that we find the hope of the God of life.

Consider in this regard the author of Lamentations. If ever there is an instance of gazing fully at the horrors of death it is the wanderings of the author of Lamentations through the desolate streets of conquered Jerusalem. After
chronicling the carnage done to the city we find this seemingly desperate confession of hope: “The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness. ‘The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him’” (Lam. 3:22-24). We find then this principle emerging: subjects affirm their subjectivity by embracing all of the trauma and bitterness of death, and they undermine this genuine subjectivity in the extent to which they attempt to quickly resolve, as the Enlightenment does, the problem of death.

The Old Testament offers us further resources for genuine subjectivity by binding God’s promises to both the dead and the living. The LORD is the “living God” but the LORD is also the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” If salvation is not accorded to those who have come before us then salvation has not been accorded to us. If the promises given to Abraham are not kept then the promises given to us are meaningless. Consider here Moses reply (rebuke?) to God on Sinai when God decides to destroy God’s people after the incident with the Golden Calf: “Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants to whom thou didst swear by thine own self,” (Exd. 32:13). We live in hope with both the living and the dead for the restoration of God’s people. “O God, why dost thou cast us off for ever? Why does thy anger smoke against the sheep of thy pasture? Remember thy congregation, which thou hast gotten of old, which thou hast redeemed to be the tribe of thy heritage! Remember Mount Zion, where thou hast dwelt” (Ps. 74:1-2). Unless God redeems both the living and the dead God has not truly restored God’s people.
Narrative: The Denial of Tragedy

Enlightenment Denial

Anyone who attempts to speak theologically on the topic of tragedy must take great care over the definition of terms. Tragedy tends to be a catchall term that loses meaning in direct proportion to the amount of uses to which it is put. To that end, I want to define tragedy, if one can call this a definition at all, via a brief remark of Donald MacKinnon. He suggests that we might think of tragedy as “a form of representation that by the very ruthlessness of its interrogation enables us to project as does no available alternative, our ultimate questioning.”60 We can see in this definition the way in which a denial of tragedy by the Enlightenment will become a deleterious force to human subjectivity. In fact, we might argue through Metz that a notion of the tragic is inherent within any conception of subjectivity within history.

History is the experience of life in contradiction and conflict...An integral part of historical life is the experience of nonidentity, the experience of division, the experience that everything just isn’t as good as it is and appears to be. The agonizingly painful experience of nonidentity brought on by violence and oppression is a part of historical life, as well the feeling of nonidentity that happens in guilt, in being fated to finitude and death. In this sense, history is always a history of suffering in the broadest sense.61

If the notion of tragedy is inherent to genuine human subjectivity, in so far as all history is in the broadest sense a history of suffering, then a denial of tragedy by the Enlightenment must be interrupted by theology via the fundamental concept of narrative. The


61 Metz, Faith in History and Society, 192-193.
fundamental concept of narrative works to our aid here in that it offers us a means to resist the tendency to deny the sufferings of this life while clinging to a notion of salvation. Instead, narrative allows us to link the two together without distorting either one.

“Theologically speaking, remembering salvation [narratively] means the reconciliation of [history’s] contradictions and conflicts through God’s action in Jesus Christ.”

For our purposes, we must seek out the ways in which the Old Testament narrative interrupts the Enlightenment denial of the tragic in history and the ways in which it offers us a more genuine subjectivity through remembering the tragic in a narrative fashion.

Just as death had no place under the purview of technical reason, so tragedy, a situation so horrific that the ensuing questions resist utterly any attempt at consolation or resolution, is likewise incalculable for technical reason. Tragedy, by its very questioning nature, resists definition, and this sort of resistance is utterly alien to the workings of technical reason. All things may be utilized for a calculated purpose and so all things must have a definition. A definition allows for dominance. Under the Enlightenment, man is freed from the forces that once sought to repress his reason, but this freedom comes only with the development of a new dominating force: man’s own technical rationality. As with death, tragedy must be denied in order to maintain the legitimacy of this dominance.

62 Ibid.

63 Several treatments have been undertaken which relate individual Old Testament narratives and tragedy. My conception of these issues is unique in that none of these treatments have attempted to relate the overarching narrative of the Old Testament and tragedy. For examples of the aforementioned treatments of individual Old Testament narratives see J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and W. Lee Humphreys *The Tragic Vision and the Hebrew Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).
The arena in which this denial is worked out was briefly touched on above—the
culture industry. We saw above that the culture industry debases death by its turning death
into something comical. In the same way, a genuine notion of tragedy is pushed out by the
culture industry and denied the dignity that was once placed upon it. To see how this
works out practically, let’s take a brief, though fun, example.

Imagine the all too typical opening scene of a horror movie. Typically these films
begin with a couple absconding off into the woods alone, in the throes of erotic love. The
ultimate victory of the culture industry’s reproduction of Enlightenment reason and
morality is that as soon as this scene flashes before our eyes we already know what the
outcome will be. The couple has violated a clear social taboo and will be dispensed by the
monster forthwith. The man will be killed in a quotidian manner; the woman will be killed
in an elaborate and voyeuristic fashion. The bourgeois notion of justice will be satisfied.64
The deception, however, is that as we watch we believe that our notion of justice is being
satisfied. The culture industry has so affected our understanding of the world that we
believe it to represent accurately our rationale. It has, in fact, impressed its rationale on us.

Such then is the debased role that tragedy assumes under the culture industry.

“Tragedy is reduced to the threat to destroy anyone who does not cooperate, whereas its
paradoxical significance once lay in a hopeless resistance to mythic destiny.”65 Tragedy
shifts from its role as a representation that allowed humanity to transcend the plight of this

64 This maintenance of morality while at the same time indulging in sexually charged
violence only serves to prove further the dictum of Horkheimer and Adorno: “[T]he culture
industry is pornographic and prudish.” See Horkheimer & Adorno, Dialectic of
Enlightenment, 140.

65 Horkheimer & Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 152
life by showing said plight in all its horror to an admonition to behave lest the horrors of fate descend upon you. This shift is done entirely for the sake of controlling the masses.

The tragic film becomes an institution for moral improvement. The masses, demoralized by their life under the pressure of the system, and who show signs of civilization only in modes of behavior which have been forced on them...are to be kept in order by the sight of an inexorable life and exemplary behavior. Culture has always played its part in taming revolutionary and barbaric instincts. Industrial culture adds its contribution.66

Beyond moral admonition, tragedy, like tradition, is relegated to a decorative embellishment—the “scrap of culture” necessary for social prestige.67 All of these shifts point to a denial of tragedy within Enlightenment thinking and, thereby, a denial of practical subjectivity.

Biblical-Theological Corrective

We are again faced with a question, but not of the same form as with the denial of death. With the denial of death, we were faced with the question of why we need the Old Testament if we have the picture of Christ as triumphant over death. In this case, the question is not whether we need the Old Testament but whether we need another type of Old Testament narrative than the Exodus. In Faith in History and Society, Metz calls “exodus” a fundamental narrative-practical idea within the logos of Christian thought.68 This means that we come to know God through participating in “exodus” narratives just as we come to know Christ through discipleship. Why then would we require a tragic

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Metz, Faith in History and Society, 63.
narrative? The Exodus seems to afford us just the sort of dangerous narrative by which we may resist Enlightenment thinking.

In many ways, this throws light on a seeming inconsistency within Metz’s two great works that we must reconcile. How is it that Metz finds within the logos of Christian thought the concept of “exodus” yet finds within the tradition of Israel a “suffering unto God” and a “poverty of spirit?” Is not the exodus a triumph? Why must we recover a “poverty of spirit” if we are no longer slaves but have been led out by the mighty hand and outstretched arm of the LORD? I would argue that this points to a recognition on Metz’s part of a key misinterpretation of the Old Testament: the tendency (particularly of liberation theologies) to tell only the Exodus story and not the later narratives of Israel.

As Jon Levenson has pointed out, it is easy to misuse the Exodus account for the purposes of establishing an ethic of liberation without attending to other aspects of the text, such as God’s faithfulness to his chosen people rather than God’s option for the oppressed. What seems a more pressing concern in my mind is the ways in which most interpreters of the story of Israel are content simply to stop at the Exodus altogether, regardless of their interpretive lens. If one were not to read carefully one might think that the Israelites were freed and then lived happily ever after. As the rest of the Old Testament shows us, nothing could be further from the truth.

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69 See Jon Levenson, “Exodus and Liberation” in The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993) 127-159. We might note here that in much the same way that the bourgeois coopted the Resurrected Christ for their own purposes, so they may also coopt the Exodus account as a profound triumph of emancipation. As Levenson notes, “For many people today liberation means in essence an expansion of choices: the more options you have, the freer you are. Concentration on the movement out of bondage in Egypt can leave the impression that the Torah too, endorses the modern Western agenda of self-determination in its various forms,” (145).
Rather than the story of God's profound and saving presence, I would argue, along with my former teacher Richard Friedman, that the Old Testament is actually a story in which the presence of God recedes as human responsibility rises. Or put more simply, “God disappears in the Bible.” Accordingly, if we freeze the Old Testament narrative at the Exodus and move no further we will assume falsely that the story of Israel ends in triumph. It does not. The narrative of Israel ends tragically and, ultimately, with more questions than answers. Thus, if we can locate this tragic sequence within the narrative of Israel then we can begin to formulate the way in which the narrative of Israel interrupts the Enlightenment denial of tragedy. An exhaustive tracing of the disappearance of God over the course of the Old Testament is obviously beyond the scope of this particular work.

What I would like to do instead is to cite a small number of events, predominantly events at the beginning and end of Israel's time in the Promised Land as indicative of this sort of tragic narrative.

70 Richard Elliott Friedman, The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995) 7. As stated above, Metz saw “exodus” as one of the fundamental narratives of the Christian logos. To that effect he said, “God 'is' in coming.” Metz, A Passion for God, 82. Under Friedman’s analysis we ought to ask whether the Old Testament reveals the exact opposite: God “is” in disappearing.

71 For precisely this sort of treatment at length, see Ibid., 7-140.

72 It should be especially noted here that one is always in danger of supersessionism when one begins to relate Israel and tragedy. In many ways that is perhaps the exact track that much of the Anti-Jewish passages in the Gospel of John take. We would, obviously, be quite the supersessionists were we to argue that Israel is a tragic figure while Christ comes as a triumphant one. Tragic Israel is transcended by Triumphant Christ and the New, Triumphant Israel—the Church. We have there nothing more than a history of the victors with Christ climbing up to victorious Calvary on the backs of the vanquished children of Israel.

A key way in which we may avoid this trap of supersessionism is by recognizing the already tragic elements apparent in Jesus’ life. For an excellent account of these aspects see Donald MacKinnon, “The Transcendence of the Tragic,” in The Problem of Metaphysics
A few passages can serve to set-up the tragic ending of the Old Testament tradition. The first is a passage from Deuteronomy. Nearing the end of his speech Moses gives the children of Israel a typical admonition. "If you are not careful to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, the LORD your God, then the LORD will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions, afflictions severe and lasting," (Deut. 28:58-59). After listing these afflictions the final invective is key for our purposes.

And the LORD will bring you back in ships to Egypt, a journey that I promised that you should never make again; and there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer. (Deut. 28:68, my emphasis).  

If it were ever apparent to us why we cannot simply stop the narrative of Israel at the culmination of the Exodus it is clear in this passage. Israel, here, is offered a tremendous choice. Obey God by keeping God’s law in the Promised Land or be sent back to Egypt to become slaves again. This, it seems to me, is the untold side of liberation.

To complicate matters further we find that the attitude towards a monarchy within Israel is a subject of great ambivalence within the Old Testament. First we have the limits put on the King in Deuteronomy. “When you come to the land which the LORD your God gives you, and you possess it and dwell in it, and then say, ‘I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are round about me’; you may indeed set as king over you him whom the

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974) 122-135. By recognizing the tragic elements common to both stories we may begin to see new ways in which we can see Jesus as linked to Israel and new ways in which we can incorporate Christ and Israel into the Servant Songs of Second Isaiah. But this topic exceeds the horizon of the present work.

73 This allusion to a second captivity aligns with N.T. Wright’s argument that Israel remains in exile during the Second Temple period. See N.T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).
LORD your God will choose,” (Deut. 17:14-15). Later, when this time comes Samuel gives the people of Israel a warning “of the LORD” in which God tells the people explicitly that the king will fail to live up to the laws set forth in Deuteronomy (1 Sam. 8:11-18). The people persist in their desire for a king, presumably because God has already given them permission through the law to have one, and God ultimately relents. “And the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Hearken to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them,” (1 Sam. 8:7). There seems, perhaps, to be even a twinge of jealousy in what God says to Samuel in this moment. The Israelites seem to have always been meant to have God as king over them, but God only ever explicitly tells this to Samuel. The people have been warned, but at the same time, the people have been given permission from God to establish the monarchy—the very monarchy that will ultimately lead to their captivity if the king fails to keep the law of the LORD. As is quite obvious from a brief perusal of 1 & 2 Kings, this precise failure occurs. The law of the LORD is neglected, and the tragic fate spoken over them by Moses on the borders of the Promised Land comes to pass. “At this, all the people from the least to the greatest, together with the army officers, fled to Egypt for fear of the Babylonians” (2 Ki. 25:26).

Yet, does this qualify the narrative of Israel as a tragedy? We cannot call it a tragedy simply because it ends badly, rather we must seek the sort of ambiguity and questioning that drives us to the ultimate questions of our existence. Where can we find those elements present in the story of Israel? I would argue we must seek these questions in two passages often attributed to the prophet Jeremiah, which seek to wrestle theologically with

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74 And in so doing carry out further Metz's plea: "Had Israel then no spirit to offer Christianity?" See Metz, A Passion for God, 64.
Israel’s tragic end. The first is found in Lamentations. Therein we find the visceral questioning of a people who have met their disastrous end.

My transgressions were bound into a yoke; by his hand they were fastened together; they were set upon my neck; he caused my strength to fail; the Lord gave me into the hands of those whom I cannot withstand. The LORD is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word; but hear all you peoples, and behold my suffering; my maidens and my young men have gone into captivity. Behold, O LORD, for I am in distress, my soul is in tumult, my heart is wrung within me, because I have been very rebellious. All my enemies have heard of my trouble; they are glad that thou hast done it. Bring thou the day thou hast announced, and let them be as I am. Let all their evil doing come before thee; and deal with them as thou hast dealt with me because of all my transgressions; for my groans are many and my heart is faint (Lam. 1: 14, 18, 21-22).

If ambiguity is an essential part of tragedy then we can see clearly the ambiguous place of YHWH in this terrible chain of events. On the one hand, the impetus for Israel’s strife is their own transgressions for which God was right to send them into captivity. Yet, on the other hand, there is a sense in which the Babylonians are themselves responsible for their own actions against God’s chosen people. God will be right to bring judgment upon them as well. Thus, God shall be the avenger of God’s people, but God has also been the cause of the suffering of God’s own people. It is God who both will repay the Babylonians and who has crushed Israel under their yoke. An ambiguous deity indeed!

We find a further, and perhaps even more heartbreaking, instance of this sort of divine ambiguity. This gut-wrenching lament occurs in the book of Jeremiah. It is perhaps one of the most-oft misused passages of scripture precisely because the tragic element of its words is constantly ignored.

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75 The two aforementioned accounts on the tragic vision and the Hebrew Bible offer excellent accounts of the ambiguities of tragedy, particularly the ambiguous role of deity in tragedy. For these see: Exum, Tragedy and Biblical Narrative, 1-15; and Humphreys, Tragic Vision and the Hebrew Tradition, 2-9.
O LORD, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, ‘I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,’ his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed I can’t....Cursed be the day I was born! May the day my mother bore me not be blessed! May the man who brought my father the news...be like the towns the LORD overthrew without pity...For he did not kill me in the womb, with my mother as my grave...Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame? (Jer. 20:7-18).

Perhaps in this cry of Jeremiah we might hear the cry of all Israel in captivity. There is a sense in which we ought to recognize Israel’s transgressions against the law to be the cause of its destruction, but then we also have just as legitimate a tradition within the Old Testament that brings forth this precise ambiguity on God’s part: God played a part in the chain of events that led to Israel’s demise. The deity seems to be both blame-worthy and praise-worthy, the just Judge bringing punishment, and the deceptive God giving Israel permission to do things which will ultimately end in suffering and disaster, all of which God, not fate, will bring upon them.

We can begin to see then the way in which the Old Testament interrupts the Enlightenment denial of tragedy. This tragic narrative of the relationship between God and God’s chosen people refuses to be turned into a means for moral improvement. We cannot use this narrative as a device for projecting bourgeois morality because the very faithfulness of God is at stake. The cry of Lamentations, “Remember O LORD what has befallen us; behold and see our disgrace!” (Lam. 5:1) turns the question of tragedy back to God with an apocalyptic sting. The idea that the fate of Israel ought to promote a return to the law simply for the sake of moral improvement is not present here. Rather, the return to God is desired so that God may return to God’s people—so that the faithfulness and justice
of YHWH might again be proved. The Old Testament, therefore, interrupts the
Enlightenment denial of tragedy through the devastatingly tragic narrative of the rise and
fall of Israel by offering us a narrative through which we may turn our questions back to
God.76

Surely tragedy interrupts, but can it offer us a more genuine subjectivity? Would
such a decimating ending not lead us to naught but despair? As quoted above, Donald
MacKinnon describes tragedy as that sort of representation that leaves us with such deep
questions as to move us towards “our ultimate questioning.” In other words, there is
something about tragedy that connects us with a fundamental aspect of our humanity. The
questions left at the end of tragedy are in fact the particular versions of fundamental
human questions. In Israel’s case the question is the place of God in our narrative. Is God
present in our story? Does God know our story and to what sort of end will he bring it?
When our story seems to be ruptured by calamity, often of our own doing (or is it?), where
is God? Did God cause it? If God did not wish it then how did it come to pass? These are the
ultimate questions of human narrative. We connect with them through our remembering
Israel, particularly the story of Israel beyond the Exodus.

76 I should note here that one may trace the extent to which the bourgeois denial of tragedy
has infected Old Testament theologies by examining their treatment of Lamentations and
the demise of Israel. Exemplary here is the great biblical theologian Bruce K. Waltke who in
his tome of over nine hundred pages treats Lamentations on only five of them. See Bruce K.
Waltke An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach
(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007) 162-163, 547-548, 840.
Memory: The Denial of Bounded Time

Enlightenment Denial

The notion of tragedy might seem to be a fitting end for this journey into the Old Testament through political theology’s lens, but we would be remiss if we ended our jaunt here. If we are to be true to Metz then our narrative and solidarity must not be solely a memory for our present. We must seek a memory that looks forward. It is clear, then, that this final section must address the questions of the future—what can we or must we say about the future through the narrative of Israel? How do these ultimate and human questions we have derived relate to our questions about the future? As with the sections above, we must first trace the way in which the Enlightenment denies these questions in order to see clearly the way in which the Old Testament interrupts the Enlightenment and, not to anticipate too much, offers us a more genuine subjectivity through its apocalyptic sting.

Perhaps the most accurate way to characterize this final Enlightenment denial is simply to call it an affirmation: an affirmation of time as endless and unbounded. As Metz himself points out, the “master myth” of Enlightenment thinking is the “myth that imagines the world against an unbounded temporal horizon, a horizon that has been evolutionistically unbound.” Time, for the bourgeois subject, has become an empty and infinite continuum within which everything repeats and nothing new can ever truly be expected. Everything continuously develops into something else. Everything is possible, yet everything is fated. More importantly, this is not simply a passing trend within

\[\text{Metz, A Passion for God, 72-73.}\]
Enlightenment thinking, rather “it is a fundamental assumption of technical rationality” itself. It is not simply that the Enlightenment has discovered afresh these facts about time; the reasoning power of the Enlightenment depends upon such emptiness to sustain itself.

To ascertain how this myth is detrimental to the individual we might offer a passage from Walter Benjamin here.

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees on single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

The logic of ceaseless development robs the individual of a conception of history or, more accurately, a means by which to remember history. The denial of bounded time or the affirmation of empty, endless time, undercuts subjectivity by decimating the concept of history. All around us may echo the sound of “disaster triumphant,” but the storm of progress will not allow us to stop for a moment so that things may be set right. The storm constantly pushes us into the future, which ultimately undermines any influence we might have on our future in the first place. The Enlightenment’s constant affirmation of the logic of progress ensures that the human subject will continue to regress.

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78 Metz, Faith in History and Society, 158.

79 Walter Benjamin, Illuminations, 257-258.

80 Horkheimer & Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 3.
Biblical-Theological Corrective

The Old Testament interrupts this constant affirmation of timeless time through what Metz calls Israel’s “this-sidedly gifted[ness].”\(^{81}\) What does this mean? Essentially, Israel did not (or perhaps could not) conceive of God as above and beyond time, i.e. existing in timeless time, but as “time’s end, coming toward it and bounding it.”\(^{82}\) This was not, however, simply another way of decimating history. Quite the contrary, as Israel saw this status of God as time’s ultimate bound to be the foundation for the temporalization of the world itself. The world only has time because God is time’s ultimate end. The recognition of the boundedness of time, rather than degrading human subjectivity into eschatological dread, revitalizes individuality by lending to the individual’s history an apocalyptic charge. Life that will soon end is electrified by the future such that the past can now be remembered for the future’s sake.

Consider for example the exhortation to justice found in Second Isaiah. “Thus says the LORD: ‘Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed’” (Is 56:1). The praxis of justice cannot simply be grounded in the logic of development or even in the evolutionistically tinged revolutionary consciousness of Marx. The praxis of righteousness in the Old Testament is indissolubly linked to the imminent expectation of God’s restoration of God’s chosen people. Note here, however, that this notion of bounded time does not function as a quick resolution to the tragedy we have examined above. Rather this sort of “remembering looking forward” keeps the apocalyptic

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\(^{81}\) Metz, *A Passion for God*, 82.

\(^{82}\) Ibid.
suspense always in the forefront. Israel cannot transport its story beyond their present state into a sort of sublated future glory.

Behold, thou wast angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? ... Be not exceedingly angry, O LORD and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, consider, we are all thy people. Thy holy cities have become a wilderness, Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and beautiful house, where our fathers praised thee, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins. Wilt thou restrain thyself at these things, O LORD? Wilt thou keep silent, and afflict us sorely? (Is. 64:5, 9-12; my emphasis).

The idea that time could continue endlessly, ever repeating equivalent events is utterly foreign to the Old Testament tradition. For if time continues onward with Zion in its current state at the time of Isaiah then all is lost. There must be answer to this wreckage of history in this time—God must be able to stop the winds of progress, to calm the storm itself and make things whole again. Israel’s entire identity is set on the outcome of “this-sidedly” events, and if the justice of God is not proved in Israel’s restoration then history itself is lost. The imminent expectation of a new heaven and a new earth (Is. 65), a restoration of Zion’s misfortunes (Jer. 29:14), and the coming of God through the Messiah (Dan. 7) interrupts the Enlightenment notion of boundless and empty time.

What counter-proposal does the Old Testament offer with regards to the loss of the practical power of memory through the Enlightenment’s denial of bounded time? Consider the Deuteronomist’s justification of the commandment to keep the Sabbath day:

“Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the LORD your God brought you up from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Because of this God commanded you to keep the Sabbath,” (Deut. 5:15). The rest from the oppressive labor suffered by the Israelites in Egypt is the impetus for the weekly rest commanded by God.  

83 My translation
Furthermore, consider the commandment, later on in Deuteronomy, to give a portion of the first fruits of the fields to the alien among them. The Israelite must come before the priest and repeat the following commemorative confession:

And you shall make response before the LORD your God, 'A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the LORD the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O LORD, hast given me.' (Deut. 26: 5-10).

The culmination of this process is that much of the crop is given those without the means to fend for themselves, those outside the bounds of society, “the Levites, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.” (Deut. 26: 12). The Law (at least under the Deuteronomist) functions through and under a dangerous memory, God’s redeeming Israel from the plight of slavery. The memory of past suffering flares up within their present as the grounds for their practical subjectivity.

The impetus towards a praxis of justice does not rely solely upon remembering the past. As we have already seen in Isaiah the impetus for a return to this praxis is also provided by the promise of God’s coming salvation. The memory of God’s deliverance and the hope of God’s future deliverance charge the praxis of the Old Testament such that genuine practical subjectivity is saved from the loss of history in the Enlightenment affirmation of boundless time. The memory of the past becomes a dangerous memory which flares up with new demands on our present—a present lived in imminent expectation of God’s restorative justice.
Conclusion: Israel as Dangerous Memory

We have begun to see how the three concepts in the Old Testament begin to converge upon one another. The praxis of justice and holiness in Israel is based upon the dangerous memory of God’s acts on Israel’s behalf in history. This memory, thus, takes on a narrative-practical form. Through the narrating of God’s acts on behalf of Israel the praxis is vitalized. Yet, we also saw that the narrative of Israel grants permission to remember those tragic narratives of suffering which so debilitate Enlightenment morality and reasoning. In the remembering of these tragic narratives, the narratives of those vanquished and lost to history, a solidarity emerges. This sort of solidarity is a solidarity of both the living and the dead. For the salvation and deliverance of God must be a deliverance for both the living and the dead if it is to be a deliverance at all.

In what way, then, can we relate this to Christian theology? Are we to simply remain ever divided from the tragedy and hope of the Old Testament? Must Bertha remain continually locked away? I said, almost in passing in the introduction, that the Church is living the story of Israel to an extent that it has yet to realize, and because of its ignorance it has failed to resist this path. What I mean by this is that we may discern in the tragedy of Israel’s monarchy many similarities between that story and the history of the church—a near mimicry, if you will. In both cases, we have an oppressed and persecuted people brought to political prominence by the hand of God. Yet, one might even be so bold as to say that because of a sort of forgetfulness with regards to its original mission this powerful
entity began to oppress in the same way it was once oppressed. It then met its end in exile from power.

In this way, we might call Israel a dangerous memory both as interruption of the Enlightenment and as a self-critique of the Church. We might imagine the Church as Mattaniah, the Babylonian appointed King after the conquest of Judah. His name was changed to Zedekiah by outside forces. He was faced with a key dilemma: live in the world as a powerless minority or rebel, retrench, and refuse to live without the power that was once his nation’s in days of old. He chose the second, and his eyes were put out.

Is this not often times the state of the Church? Have we not been blinded by the spell of timelessness, by the inability to recognize true tragedy, by the toothy and glib cry, tinged with the tone of a well-placed advertisement, of the triumph of the coopted Christ? “He is risen indeed!” Can we not hear in the constant power-grabs of this election season by a variety of Christian groups (Evangelical Right and Catholic Left alike) the same refusal to live without the power of Christendom? It seems the Old Testament offers us a new way: an open gate. To enter by this gate is to put to death our desire for power, our desire to belong in the world, and to force the world to exist for our comfort. Still, hope remains after this death. But precisely what sort of hope?

In the Critique of Pure Reason Kant famously synthesized the concerns of all reason into three questions: “1.) What can I know? 2.) What ought I to do? 3.) What may I hope?” Metz reformulates Kant’s final question in this way: What may I hope for you? And,

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84 In Israel’s case this turn from oppressed to oppressor occurred in the imposition of corvee by Solomon in 1 Kings 9:15-23. For the Church, the once persecuted people of pagan governments, this same reversal occurred in the Crusades and Inquisition.

therefore, what may I hope for myself? From this reformulation we define our notion of Israel as dangerous memory this way: What may we hope for Israel (both living and dead)? And therefore, what may we hope for the Church? This memory puts even more of an apocalyptic sting onto both Judaism and Christianity. If we are truly to embrace both Testaments of our scriptural inheritance then we must recognize that the apocalyptic question of the Parousia and the Restoration are both ever-pending questions for the Church. For if Jesus is Lord but Israel is discarded then we have believed in vain.

Our study of the interruptions of the Old Testament has interrupted, then, both Enlightenment thinking and some prevailing notions of Christian theology, perhaps through my own form of guerilla attack. We are here truly at the opening of a narrow gate. I am reminded of Franz Rosenzweig’s final words of his magnum opus, The Star of Redemption: “But whither do the wings of the gate open? You do not know?” The gate opens into an era of the Church in which the Jewish traditions are no longer blocked from its view. The gate opens into a new view of ecumenism between Judaism and Christianity—a shared praxis of justice and holiness. The gate opens to the shore of the crystal sea upon which both the Song of the Sea and the Song of the Lamb shall be sung—the song of two covenants which are upheld by God from everlasting (Rev. 15:3). The gate opens into two dangerous memories charging the praxis of Church and Synagogue in history and society. The gate opens into the apocalyptic hope of the restoration of Zion’s fortune and the Second Coming of the Savior of the nations.

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86 This notion of hope occurs two places in Metz. See Metz, Faith in History and Society, 84; and Metz, A Passion for God, 164-165.

The gate opens “INTO LIFE.”

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88 Ibid.
REFERENCES

PRIMARY SOURCES


SECONDARY SOURCES


