AT THE MERCY OF BABYLON:
A SUBVERSIVE REREADING OF THE EMPIRE*

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Biblical theology as a study of Israel's faithful speech may be said to revolve around two organizing questions. The first question of biblical theology is, How does Israel speak about God? Israel characteristically does not speak about God unless it speaks at the same time about the world in which God is present and over which God governs. For that reason, the second question of biblical theology is, What else must Israel talk about when it talks about God? It belongs decisively to the character of this God, as artistically rendered in Israel's text, to be always engaged in ways that impinge both upon God and upon God's "other." One aspect of that God-other engagement which is typical of Israel's theological speech is God in relation to the nations. The God of Israel is a God who deals with the nations, and the nations inescapably deal with the God of Israel. Together they form a common subject in Israel's theological speech.

I

The great powers, north and south, dominate Israel's public life and policy.[1] In this paper I will pay attention to one of the great northern powers, Babylon, and the way in which Babylon enters into Israel's speech about God. Although Babylon may be regarded as simply one among several great powers that concern Israel, it is also clear that Babylon peculiarly occupies the imagination of Israel.

Babylon goads and challenges Israel's theological imagination in remarkably varied ways. As a theological metaphor, Babylon is not readily dismissed or easily categorized. Indeed, in the postexilic period, it is Babylon and not Persia that continues to function as a powerful theological metaphor for Israel. Babylon operates supplely in Israel's theological speech because

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[1] On the bipolar geopolitical situation of Israel, see A. Malamat, "The Kingdom of Judah Between Egypt and Babylon: A Small State Within a Great Power Confrontation," in *Text and Context* (ed. W. Claassen; JSOTSup 48; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988) 117-29.

Babylon is a partner and an antagonist in Israel's political life and is perceived as a partner and an antagonist worthy of Yahweh. As Yahweh cannot be settled or reduced in Israel's discernment, so Babylon cannot be settled or reduced, but remains as a tensive, energizing force in Israel's faith and imagination. Moreover, if the experience of exile was decisive for the canonizing process, as seems most probable, then it is equally probable that Babylon takes on imaginative power that is not simply historical and political but canonical in force, significance, and density.

By considering the theological function of Babylon, we are concerned with the question, What happens to *speech about Babylon* when it is drawn into the sphere of speech about God? In a lesser fashion, we will also ask, What happens to *speech about God* when God is drawn into the sphere of speech about the empire? In posing these questions, it is clear that we are taking up issues of artistic construal that are not fully contained in historical and political categories. As George Steiner has said of great art in general, we are dealing in the Bible not simply with a formulation but with a reformulation and a rethinking.[2] We are concerned with a canonizing process whereby Israel voices its normative, paradigmatic construal of imperial power. Israel's rhetoric at the interface of God and empire is a concrete attempt to hold together the inscrutable reality of God (which is at the center of its rethought world) and the raw power of the empire (which is a daily reality of its life). Israel's self-identity, presence in the world, and chance for free action depend upon how these two are held together.

By joining speech about God to speech about Babylon, Israel's faith radically rereads the character of the empire, consistently subverting every conventional reading of the empire in which complacent Babylon and intimidated Israel must have colluded. That is, Babylon presented itself as autonomous, invincible, and permanent. When Israel entered fully into the ideology of Babylon (and abandoned its own covenantal definitions of reality), it accepted this characterization of Babylon and, derivatively, its own fate as completely defined by Babylonian reality. This is a classic example of the phenomenon, noted by Marx, of the victim willingly participating in the ideology of the perpetrator.[3] This conventional collusion about power practiced by perpetrators and victims is controverted, however, in Israel's alternative reading, which is deeply and inherently subversive. When Israel, in a Yahwistic context, could discern that Babylon was not as it presented itself, then Israel did not need to define its own situation so hopelessly. Thus Yahwistic faith makes an alternative to imperial ideology available to those who live from this counterrhetoric.

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[2] George Steiner writes of "un-ending re-reading" and reevaluation (*Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say* [London: Faber & Faber, 1989]).

[3] See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology Part One* (ed. C. J. Arthur; London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970) 64–68.

II

I have selected six texts concerning Babylon on which to focus: Jer 42:9–17; 50:41–43; Isa 47:5–7; 1 Kgs 8:46–53; 2 Chr 36:15–21; and Dan 4:19–27.[4] My thesis, which I will explicate in relation to these texts, is that when Israel's speech about Babylon is drawn into Israel's speech concerning God, the power of the empire is envisioned and reconstructed around the issue of mercy (*rḥm*).[5] The intrusion of the rhetoric of mercy into the *Realpolitik* of Babylon derives from the uncompromising character of God. It also arises from the deepest yearning of the exilic community which must have mercy to live, which expects mercy from God, and which by venturesome rhetoric dares to insist that the promised, yearned-for mercy cannot be ignored by the empire.

Jeremiah 42:9–17

In its final form the book of Jeremiah has a decidedly pro-Babylonian slant, mediated through the Baruch document and perhaps powered by the authority and influence of the family of Shaphan.[6] The sustained urging of the text is that the people of Jerusalem must stay in the jeopardized city and submit to the occupying presence of Babylon and not flee to Egypt. This announcement reflects a political judgment and a political interest that cooperation with Babylon is a safer way to survival. This voice of advocacy also concluded that cooperation with Egypt would only cause heavier, more destructive Babylonian pressure. That political judgment, however, is given as an oracle of God. The urging therefore is not simply political strategy, but is offered as the intent of God for God's people. Thus the oracle is not simply speech concerning the empire but also speech about God.

The oracle of Jeremiah 42 is cast in two conditional clauses: one positive, "if" you remain in the city (vv. 10–12); the other negative, "if" you flee to

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[4] Texts on Babylon that I will not consider include Isaiah 13–14; materials in Isaiah 40–55; references in the Ezekiel collection of oracles against the nations; 2 Chr 30:6–9; and Dan 1:5–9.

[5] In the texts I will consider, there are two exceptions to the use of the term *rḥm*. In 2 Chr 36:15–21, the term is *ḥml*. In Dan 4:24, the term used is *ḥnn*. Both these terms, however, belong in the same semantic field as *rḥm*. On the political, public dimensions of *rḥm*, see Michael Fishbane, "The Treaty Background of Amos 1:11 and Related Matters," *JBL* 89 (1970) 313–18; and Robert B. Coote, "Amos 1:11: RḤMYW," *JBL* 90 (1971) 206–8. On the intimate, interpersonal nuances of the term, see Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 31–59.

[6] Christopher R. Seitz has discerned the conflicting and competing ideologies concerning exile present in the book of Jeremiah (*Theology in Conflict: Reactions to the Exile in the Book of Jeremiah* [BZAW 176; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989]). On the peculiar and decisive role of the family of Shaphan in the Jeremiah tradition, see J. Andrew Dearman, "My Servants the Scribes: Composition and Context in Jeremiah 36," *JBL* 109 (1990) 403–21.

Egypt (vv. 13–17). The positive conditional clause is cast as a promise that
God will repent of evil and issues in a salvation oracle:[7]

> Do not fear the king of Babylon
>   of whom you are afraid,
> Do not fear him, says the Lord, for I am with you
>   to deliver you from his hand. (v. 11)

The Jeremiah tradition takes a conventional speech form, the salvation
oracle, and presses it into new use. The conventional form is "Do not fear,"
followed by an assurance; here, however, the form is daringly extended to
identify the one not to be feared, the king of Babylon.[8] Moreover, the speech
form is utilized exactly to juxtapose the fearsome power of Nebuchadnezzar
and the resolve of the Lord: "Do not fear him . . . I will deliver." The oracle
counters the empire with God's good resolve. The assurance of God
continues:

> I will grant you mercy (raḥămîm)
>   that (wĕ) he will have mercy on you,[9]
>   and let you remain in the land. (v. 12)

The connection between "I" and "he" (the king of Babylon) is elusive, bridged
only by a *waw* consecutive. The oracle does, however, insist on this decisive,
albeit elusive, link between Yahweh's resolve and anticipated imperial policy.
The oracle asserts that Babylon can indeed be a source of mercy to Jeru-
salem, when the empire subscribes to God's own intention. The negative
counterpart of vv. 13–17 indicates that if there is flight to Egypt and away
from Babylon, the same Babylonian king who is capable of mercy will indeed
be "the sword which you fear" (v. 16).

Our historical-critical propensity is to say that the oracle of Jer 42:9–17
simply reflects a wise, pragmatic political decision. Such a reading, however,
ignores the casting of the speech in which the "I" of God's mercy directly
shapes the "he" of Nebuchadnezzar's policy. That rhetorical linkage is crucial
for the argument of the whole of the tradition. This rhetorical maneuver
recasts the empire as an agent who is compelled, under the right circum-
stance, to show mercy. The speech practice of the Jeremiah-Baruch-Shaphan

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[7] On the theological implications of this text, see Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*
(OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 138–44; and Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman,
Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (AB 24A; Garden City, NY:
Doubleday, 1989) 659–63.

[8] See Edgar W. Conrad, *Fear Not Warrior* (BJS 75; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985) 48–51.

[9] The LXX reads the second verb in the first person, "I will have mercy on you," thus remov-
ing the tension that is crucial to our argument. That rendering makes the text irrelevant to the
interface we are seeking to identify. Recent major commentaries consistently prefer the MT
reading. See John Bright, *Jeremiah: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 21; Garden City, NY:
Doubleday, 1965) 256.

tradition includes Babylon in the sphere where mercy will be practiced as a public reality.

Jeremiah 50:41–43

Scholars tend to read these "oracles against the nations" as a separate literary unit and in terms of historical, political developments. The MT places the oracles against the nations, and especially chaps. 50–51 against Babylon, at the end of the book; this arrangement invites us to pay attention to their canonical intention, that is, to move beyond historical, political concerns to notice the connection between these oracles and other parts of the Jeremiah tradition.[10]

In the MT ordering of materials, the midterm verdict of the book of Jeremiah is that Nebuchadnezzar will triumph and rule, even in Jerusalem (25:8–11; 27:5–7b). That midterm verdict, however, is overcome by the final verdict of the MT book of Jeremiah (see also 25:12–14; 27:7b). In the end, it will be God and not Nebuchadnezzar who prevails in the historical process. Again, we can read this assertion simply in relation to the politics of the nations, so that we anticipate (in retrospect) that the Persians will have defeated and succeeded the Babylonians.

Israel's way of speaking, however, is not rooted simply in historical analysis. The ominous verdict against Babylon in Jer 50:41–43 is rather an intentional rhetorical effort that intends to answer and resolve the so-called Scythian Song of 6:22–24. This is not simply a conventional recycling of poetic images, but this reuse of poetic material intends to counter and refute the first use. The purpose of the Scythian Song (6:22–24) is to invoke in the most threatening fashion the coming of the intruder from the north. The coming threat is portrayed in this way:

> They lay hold on bow and spear,
> they are cruel and have no mercy (*rḥm*). (6:23)

In contrast to the anticipated Babylonian accommodation of chap. 42, the poetry of 6:23 knows that there will be "no mercy" from the invading army. The coming of the invader with "no mercy" in chap. 6 is God's resolve to punish recalcitrant Jerusalem.

Chapter 50 uses the same rhetoric to reverse the earlier verdict of 6:23. Now the threatening intruder from the north is not Babylon, but one who

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[10] The alternative placement of these texts by the LXX after 25:14 anticipates the debate about whether Nebuchadnezzar's massive power is temporary (MT chaps. 27–28) and whether Jerusalem will indeed be given a future (MT chap. 29). See William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah* (2 vols.; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986, 1989) 2. 312–14. Note the abrupt "until" in 27:2, 11. Moreover, 25:12–14 anticipates the demise of Babylon and asserts that the Babylonians will in time be reduced to a status of slavery (cf. Isa 47:1–4).

comes against Babylon. This coming people, like Babylon, is savage in its invasion.

> They lay hold of bow and spear;
> they are cruel, and have no mercy (*rḥm*). (50:42)

The ones who come against Babylon have "no mercy." Thus the poem threatens and destabilizes Babylon with the same phrasing that authorized Babylon in 6:22–23.

The use of the same phrasing in 6:22–24 and 50:41–43 greatly illuminates the way in which Yahweh relates to the nations. On the one hand, Yahweh is in both situations the one who takes initiative, the one with authority. On the other hand, Yahweh's purpose is multidimensional, so that in different times and circumstances, the rule of God may be evidenced both for Babylon and against Babylon. In both postures, the way of Yahweh is the implementation of a policy of "no mercy."

The prose commentary that follows this oracle in 50:44–46 interprets the poetry. It makes a sweeping theological claim: God has a plan (*'ṣh*) and a purpose (*mḥšb*) and can appoint and summon "whomever I choose" (v. 44). The retention and exercise of imperial power are tentative and provisional. Even the great Nebuchadnezzar, the rhetoric asserts, is subject to the rule of Yahweh which concerns the practice of "mercy" and "no mercy." Thus the oracle of Jeremiah 50–51 at the end of the canonical book asserts the rule of God over international affairs. The reuse of 6:22–23 is, for our purposes, particularly important. The double use connects the dispatch of Babylon by God with "no mercy," and then the destruction of Babylon, with "no mercy."

Two things strike us in this construal of Babylon's destiny. First, God deals directly with Babylon and Persia, without any reference to Judah or Jerusalem. God is indeed the God of the nations. Second, the exercise of God's sovereignty concerns matters of mercy and no mercy. The destiny of Babylon turns on Yahweh's various initiatives with mercy. Thus the rhetoric of Israel reconstitutes the geopolitics of the Fertile Crescent with reference to mercy.

The sequence of 6:22–24 (which anticipates Babylon) and 50:41–43 (which dismisses Babylon) stands in an odd relation to the salvation oracle of chap. 42. The editing of the book of Jeremiah is complex, so that we may indeed have different editorial hands. In the text as we have it, the Baruch document promises mercy from Babylon, though that mercy is conditional (42:9–17). The poetic units, both the "early" poem (6:22–23) and the oracle against the Babylonians (50:41–43), refute the option of mercy. Yet in all of the texts, whatever their origin, the rise and fall of empires have been drawn into the language of mercy. The tradition insists about Babylon, Persia, Jerusalem, and God's assurance, that the play of power around the city of Jerusalem raises the question and the possibility of mercy.

Isaiah 47:5–7

Because we do not know when to date the Jeremiah materials, we do not know about the relative dating of Jeremiah 50 and Isaiah 47.[11] I take up Isaiah 47 after the Jeremiah text because conventionally Deutero-Isaiah is placed after Jeremiah, though Jeremiah 50 may indeed be later. In any case, Isaiah 47 permits a more comprehensive and reflective commentary on the mercy questions posed in the Jeremiah tradition. In brief form, Isaiah 47 offers one of the most comprehensive statements of Israel's theology of the nations. God's dealing with the empire is elaborated in four stages:

1. I was angry with my people. (v. 6a)

The tradition insists that the destruction of Jerusalem was not an accomplishment of Babylonian policy but happened at the behest of God (cf. Jer 25:8–11; 27:5–6; Isa 40:1–2). The destruction is a sovereign act of God, only implemented by Nebuchadnezzar.

2. I profaned my heritage,
   I gave them into your hand. (v. 6bc)

It is God who submits Jerusalem to the invasion of Babylon. These first two elements of the speech of God constitute a conventional prophetic lawsuit. Israel is indicted for its failure to obey God. Israel is placed under the judgment of foreign invasion. The coming of the invader is God's stance of "no mercy" toward Jerusalem.

3. The third element of this oracle is unexpected and moves well beyond the conventional lawsuit speech:

You [Babylon] showed no mercy (*rḥm*). (v. 6d)

The text offers no grammatical connection between this statement and what has just preceded. We expect "but" or "however" or "nevertheless," but we get nothing.[12]

4. This parataxis then leads to a rebuke of the empire:

You said, "I will be mistress forever,"
So that you did not lay these things to heart
    or remember their end. (v. 7)

The first two elements in Isa 47:5–7, then, are conventional: God is angry with Israel. God punishes Israel by summoning a punishing nation, in this

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[11] The current options for dating the materials are reflected in the commentaries of William L. Holladay, (*Jeremiah*) and Robert P. Carroll (*Jeremiah: A Commentary* [OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986]). The dating of the materials is not important for our argument about rhetoric but would illuminate the sequence in which the texts might be taken up.

[12] On the function of such parataxis, see G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 117–21.

case Babylon. We are not prepared for the third and fourth elements, however. The speech is constructed as though Nebuchadnezzar (and Babylonian policy) was all along supposed to have known that mercy toward Jerusalem was in order and expected, appropriate even in light of God's anger. Inside the drama of the text, I imagine Nebuchadnezzar could react to these third and fourth elements in God's speech by saying in indignation, "Mercy? You never mentioned mercy." Of course, Nebuchadnezzar is not permitted to speak at all, except in the poetic self-indictment of v. 7a.

The turn in the third element of Isa 47:5–7 is precisely pertinent to our thesis. "Mercy" readily intrudes into political talk where it is not expected. Mercy impinges on the policies and destiny even of the empire. In conversation about God and empire, mercy operates as a nonnegotiable factor. Nebuchadnezzar should have known that Yahweh is that kind of God. From the beginning, Yahweh has been a God of mercy, and mercy is characteristically present where Yahweh is present. In the end, even the empire stands or falls in terms of God's resilient commitment to mercy. Ruthless power cannot circumvent that resolve of God.

It is clear that rhetorically something decisive has happened between the second and third elements of this oracle. The first two phrases look back to 587 and echo the predictable claims of lawsuit, long anticipated by the prophets. In the third and fourth phrases, however, the poet has turned away from conventional lawsuit claims, away from 587, away from destruction and judgment. Now the poet looks forward, out beyond the exile. Now God's very tool of exile has become the object of God's indignation. In this moment, God's old, old agenda of mercy reemerges (cf. Exod 34:6–7). The practice of this rhetoric, in the horizon of the poet, destabilizes the empire. Israel's speech knows that empires, in their imagined autonomy, will always have to come to terms with God's alternative governance.[13] The empire is never even close to being ultimate, but always lives under the threat of this rhetoric, which rejects every imperial complacency, every act of autonomy, every gesture of self-sufficiency. The poem of Isaiah 47 ends with an awesome verdict emerging from this exchange about arrogant autonomy and mercy: "There is no one to save you!" (v. 15).

1 Kings 8:46–53

This text is commonly taken to belong to the latest layer of deuteronomic interpretation.[14] It is cast as part of the prayer of Solomon. It is structured

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[13] See, e.g., Isa 37:22–29; and Donald E. Gowan, *When Man Becomes God* (PTMS 6; Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1975) 31–35.

[14] See Hans Walter Wolff, "The Kerygma of the Deuteronomic Historical Work," in *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions* (ed. W. Brueggemann and H. W. Wolff; Atlanta: Knox, 1982) 95–97.

as an if–then formulation, echoed in 2 Chr 30:9. The petition anticipates a conditional exile. It contains an "if" of repentance in exile (v. 48) and a "then" followed by four imperatives addressed to God on the basis of repentance:

> hear thou in heaven . . .
> maintain their cause, and
> forgive thy people . . .
> grant them compassion (*rḥm*). (vv. 49–50)

A motivation is offered to God in v. 51; an additional petition is voiced in v. 52; and a final motivational clause is given in v. 53.

What interests us is the fourth imperative of petition in vv. 49–50: "Grant them compassion (*rḥm*) in the sight of those who carried them away captive, that they may have compassion (*rḥm*) on them." It is clear in the prayer that it is God and only God who gives mercy. God is the only subject of the verb *ntn*. God must grant mercy if any is to be given. The last word of the petition adds, however, "that they [the captors] may have mercy." Again the inclination of God and the disposition of Babylon are intimately related to each other. It is not doubted that the Babylonian empire could be a place of mercy. The exile can be a place of compassion, but that can only be because God hears prayers and attends to the needs of the exiles. The empire is a place where God's inclination for mercy can indeed be effected in a concrete, public way. Babylon can enact what God grants.[15] The claim of this text is close to the affirmation of Jer 42:12.

2 Chronicles 36:15–21

This text is the penultimate paragraph of 2 Chronicles. In these verses the Chronicler gives closure to the narrative, and engages in a sweeping retrospective. The term "mercy" (*ḥml*) occurs twice in this concluding and ominous statement. First, the God of Israel is a God of mercy who has practiced long-term, persistent mercy toward Israel: "The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had mercy (*ḥml*) on his people and on his dwelling place" (v. 15). The whole history of prophecy is an act of mercy. In this usage, however, mercy is not rescue but warning, to deter Jerusalem from its self-destructive action. Israel, however, refused and resisted, until God's wrath arose and there was "no remedy" (*'ên marpē'*, v. 16).

This passage is constructed so that Babylon does not appear in the text until God's mercy is spent. Only then does the empire enter the scene: "Therefore, he [God] brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who

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[15] Richard Nelson suggests that the promise of mercy from "your captors" "is the thinnest possible offer of a chance at return for the exiles, one the narrator dares not even whisper" (cf. Ps. 106:46) (*First and Second Kings* [Interpretation; Atlanta: Knox, 1987] 54–55).

slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no mercy (*hml*) on young man or virgin, old man or aged; he gave them all into his hand" (v. 17). It was the designated work of Babylon to destroy, reflective of God's exhausted mercy. The statement is framed so that the active subject at the beginning and end is God; only in between these statements is the king of Babylon permitted as an active agent. Thus far the argument with the double use of "mercy" closely parallels the first two elements of the argument in Isaiah 47.

It is to be recognized that the key term in this text is *hml* and not *rhm*, as elsewhere in our analysis. However, the explicit reference to Jeremiah in v. 21 suggests that this text in the Chronicler is an intentional development of the Jeremiah tradition.[16] The Chronicler reiterates the assertions of the Jeremiah tradition which justify the catastrophe of 587. Yet the Chronicler also moves beyond the reflections of the Jeremiah tradition. Thus the text of Jeremiah is cited as an anticipation which now comes to fresh fulfillment. This penultimate paragraph with the double, albeit negative, reference to "mercy" prepares the way for the final paragraph of vv. 22–23, which moves dramatically beyond judgment to God's new act of mercy among the nations: "Now in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, that the word of the Lord in the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus the Persian so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing" (v. 22). Even this new world power is to fulfill the word of Jeremiah. Now begins the new phase of Jewish history with Cyrus. It is a new beginning to which Jeremiah 50 has made negative reference, and to which Isaiah 44–47 makes positive reference. Our pivotal point of interpretation juxtaposes *the exhausted mercy of Yahweh* and *the lacking mercy of Babylon.*

These texts from Jeremiah, Isaiah, 1 Kings, and the Chronicler seem to be intimately connected to each other in a sustained reflection on the destiny of Israel vis-à-vis Babylon and the workings of God. The salient point is that mercy from God and mercy from Babylon live in an odd and tense relation; neither will work effectively without the other. That is, when Babylon has mercy, it is derivative from the mercy of God. Conversely, when God has no mercy left, there will be none from Babylon. This straightforward connection, however, is disrupted by the discernment of Isa 47:6. It is this text that creates tension between the mercy of heaven and the mercy of earth. The tension occurs because the empire can indeed exercise autonomy. That autonomy characteristically is self-serving, against mercy, and sure to bring self-destruction, even upon the empire.

In all these texts, Israel is now prepared to move toward the newness embodied in Cyrus the Persian. Thanks to Deutero-Isaiah, the Persian

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[16] On this text as an example of intertextual reading, see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) 481–82.

period, in contrast to that of the Babylonians, is perceived as a new saving action of God which permits the survival and modest prosperity of Judaism. Yet Persia never takes on the imaginative power or metaphorical force of Babylon. In the OT, the theological struggle concerning public power and divine purpose remains focused on the reality, memory, experience, and symbolization of Babylon.

Daniel 4:19–27

When we come to the book of Daniel, we see that Israel's theological reflection cannot finally finish with Babylon. It is clear that by the time of the Daniel texts, we have broken free of historical reference; Nebuchadnezzar now looms on the horizon of Israel as a cipher for a power counter to the Lord.[17] It is, moreover, evident that Babylon is not a reduced or flattened metaphor, for then Nebuchadnezzar could be defeated and dismissed in the literature. Nebuchadnezzar, however, is kept very much alive and present by the rhetoric of Israel.

The narrative of Daniel 4 concerns the dream of Nebuchadnezzar that the "great tree" will be cut down. As Daniel interprets this dream, it anticipates Nebuchadnezzar's loss of power. Two assumptions operate for the narrator which make the story possible. First, it is proper, legitimate, and acceptable for Jewish lore to entertain a story about Nebuchadnezzar. As we might expect, such a story is told in order to mock and deride the great king. As we shall see, the narrative is not finally a mocking or dismissal of Nebuchadnezzar, but in fact portrays his remarkable rehabilitation. Thus the horizon of the Bible does not flatly dismiss the empire but entertains its possible transformation to an agent of obedience.

Second, the narrative assumes that the great king and his governmental apparatus are dysfunctional. In the end, the great king must step outside his own official circles of power and influence for the guidance he needs. On one level the narrative is a rather conventional contrast between the stupid wielder of power and the shrewd outsider who is able to turn the tables. As we shall see, however, the narrator moves in a different, somewhat unexpected direction. This story is not primarily about how a Jew prevails over Babylon. It is a story, in the end, about the well-being of Babylon and its power.

Daniel's interpretation of the dream of the king turns on three crucial affirmations. (1) "It is you, O King" (v. 22). The interpretation by Daniel brings the dream into immediate political risk with rhetoric that recalls Nathan's

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[17] On the freedom of the Daniel text from historical reference, see W. S. Towner, "Were the English Puritans 'the Saints of the Most High?' Issues in the Pre-Critical Interpretation of Daniel 7," *Int* 37 (1983) 46–63; and more programmatically Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 618–22.

indictment of David (2 Sam 12:7). (2) The purpose of the dream is "until you know that the Most High has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals and gives it to whom he will" (v. 25). This formula dominates the narrative, occurring in vv. 14, 22, and 29, and with greater variation, v. 34. Moreover, the formulation contains an echo of Jer 50:44, to which we have already made reference (cf. 49:19): "I will appoint over him whomever I choose. For who is like me? Who will summon me? What shepherd can stand before me? Therefore, hear the plan which the Lord has made against Babylon. . . ." In the Jeremiah usage, the transfer of power away from Babylon to "a people from the north" is sure and settled.

In the Daniel narrative, however, there is a third point which leads the narrative in a surprising direction. At the end of his interpretive account, Daniel says, "Therefore, O King, let my counsel be acceptable to you; break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy (*ḥn*) to the oppressed" (v. 24).[18] Daniel's counsel to the king is unexpected in this context. We have been given no reason to anticipate this narrative development. Daniel ceases here to be an interpreter and becomes a moral instructor of and witness to the great king. For our purposes, it is important to recognize that the empire is understood by the narrative as a potential place of mercy; Nebuchadnezzar is presented as a ruler who is capable of mercy to the oppressed and would be wise to practice such mercy and righteousness.

In the unfolding of the narrative, we are never told that Nebuchadnezzar heeded Daniel and practiced righteousness and mercy. We are later told, however, that his "reason (*minda'*) returned" (v. 31). He submitted in praise to the Most High (vv. 31–32). Thus it is legitimate to imagine that the narrative understands the "return of reason," the capacity to praise, and the reception of majesty and splendor to Nebuchadnezzar (v. 36) as evidence of the practice of mercy as urged by Daniel.

We may now consider the sequence of texts we have discussed concerning the recurring interplay of God, mercy, and the destiny of the empire: (1) In Jer 6:23 and 2 Chr 36:1, there is no mercy because God intended that there should be no mercy. (2) In Isa 47:6, there is no mercy, and Nebuchadnezzar is sharply admonished for this lack, which violates God's intention. (3) In Jer 42:12 and 1 Kgs 8:50, Babylon is judged to be capable of mercy, and Jews may legitimately expect mercy. (4) In Daniel 4:27, which is a late, perhaps climactic word on Babylon in the OT, the hope of Daniel again counts on the mercy of the empire, as that mercy is anticipated in Jer 42:12 and 1 Kgs 8:50.

To be sure, this good word about Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon may be simply part of a Jewish strategy of political quietism and cooperation. We should not, however, neglect the theological force of Dan 4:22 and its fruition

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[18] As indicated, the term here is not *rḥm* but *ḥnn*. On the cruciality of the old creedal formulation in which they are closely related, see Hermann Spieckermann, "Barmherzig und gnädig ist der Herr . . . ," *ZAW* 102 (1990) 1–18.

in vv. 34–37. The theological claim of the narrative, regardless of what it may mean for Jewish conduct and hope, is that the empire is transformable and can become a place of mercy and righteousness. This transformation happens when the God of Israel is accepted as the Most High, that is, when the empire is brought under the rule of the Lord. Thus the nations, given this example of Babylon, are redeemable, transformable, and capable of salvage for the humane purposes of God. Moreover, the narrative of Daniel 4 is a warning to all would-be Nebuchadnezzars that the exercise of power uninformed by righteousness and mercy will lead to insanity and loss of authority. The empire is a place that may host mercy. It is a place which, in its self-interest, must host mercy. There is no alternative strategy for royal power that can possibly succeed.[19]

III

At the outset, I offered two questions to focus the task of theological interpretation: How does Israel speak about God? And what else must Israel talk about when it talks about God? The answer to the first question, given our topic, is that Israel talks about God in terms of the reality of mercy. The answer to the second question, I have suggested, is that when Israel speaks of the mercy of God, it must speak of the nations, specifically *Babylon*, more specifically, *the mercy of Babylon*. To say that Israel's speech about God entails speech about the mercy of the Babylonian empire evidences the delicate, daring enterprise that Israel's theological speech inescapably is. In its theological speech, Israel recharacterizes God. At the same time, it recharacterizes the empire and the meaning of worldly power.

Israel's speech about God requires and permits Israel to say that the empire is not what it is usually thought to be. It is not what it is thought to be by Israelites who fear and are intimidated by the empire. Conversely, it is not what it is thought to be by the wielders of power themselves, in their presumed self-sufficiency. Negatively, this claim of mercy asserts that imperial rule is not rooted simply in raw power. Israel, when it is theologically intentional, will not entertain the notion that "might makes right." Positively, this claim asserts that political power inherently and intrinsically has in its very fabric the reality of mercy, the practice of humanness, or as Daniel dares to say to Nebuchadnezzar, the care of the oppressed (Dan 4:27). This daring rhetoric which follows from Israel's speech about God does not

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[19] In addition to the several texts that juxtapose "mercy" and "Babylon," there is a large number of texts dated in and around the exilic period that speak of God's mercy: see Isa 14:1; 49:13–15; 54:7–10; 55:7; 60:10; Mic 7:19; Jer 12:15; 30:18; 31:20; 33:26; Lam 3:22, 32; Hab 3:2; Zech 1:12, 16; 10:6. These texts suggest that "mercy" became an extremely important theological issue in a time when Israel's relation to God appeared to be in jeopardy. These texts, however, lie outside the scope of this study because they do not explicitly concern the empire, and because the mercy is promised after the exile by the empire, and not in the midst of it.

mean that the holder of power will always accept this characterization of power. Israel nonetheless refuses to allow any enterprise of power to exist and function outside the zone of its theological rhetoric.

This claim about imperial power is even more stunning when the subject of such speech is characteristically Babylon. The same playful, ambiguous, venturesome rhetoric of Israel is also employed concerning Egypt and Assyria, but perhaps not as extensively. While Babylon functions in this regard as a metaphor for all such power, no doubt Babylon, in and of itself, occupies a peculiar and distinctive role in Israel's theological horizon. In the Bible Israel would never finish with Babylon, and therefore its speech about Babylon is of peculiar importance.

We may suggest two reasons for this odd focus. First, there is good histori-cal reason for such an insistence concerning Babylon. The deportation of the Jerusalem elite required honest and alarming theological reflection by the makers of Judaism. It was Babylon that had the capacity to create a situation in which God's mercy was experienced as null and void; Israel was left to wonder what that nullification signified (see Lam 5:20–22). Second, there is surely canonical reason for such a focus on Babylon. It is most plausible that the process of displacement in the sixth century not only was decisive for the community that experienced it but also became, through the process of canonization, a decisive paradigmatic reality for continuing generations of Jews.[20]

Thus the exile became paradigmatic for all Jews, including the God of the Jews. Jews and the God of the Jews must come to terms with the definitional role of Babylon. It was exactly the experience and metaphor of *Babylonian exile* that made the question of *mercy* so acute. It was exactly the mercy of God, remembered, experienced, and anticipated, that made a redefinition of Babylon so urgent and so problematic.

Israel's rhetoric accomplished a stunning claim. It asserted that no savage power in the world could separate Israel from God's mercy. It did more than that, however; it also asserted that no savage power, no matter its own self-discernment, can ever be cut off from the reality of God's mercy. It is for that reason that the burden of mercy is repeatedly thrust upon Nebuchadnezzar. For that reason Daniel finally, at the end of this literature, has Nebuchad-nezzar's "reason return" (Dan 4:31). Now Nebuchadnezzar "knows."[21] What

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[20] Jacob Neusner has shown how the displacement in the sixth century became a shaping paradigm for the self-understanding of all Judaism, a paradigm only loosely connected with the historical realities (*Understanding Seeking Faith* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986] 137–41).

[21] The term usually rendered as "reason" is *yd'*. Thus the "reason" of Nebuchadnezzar is the acknowledgment that the world is indeed shaped through the intention and governance of Yahweh. Though the term *yd'* is here removed from the notion of "covenantal acknowledgment," it still participates in that covenantal reality whereby "knowing" consists in reckoning with in loyal obedience (cf. Jer 22:16). See H. B Huffmon, "The Treaty Background of Hebrew *Yada'*," *BASOR* 184 (1966) 31–37.

he knows is that power is held by the God who gives it as God wills.[22]
Moreover, "God wills" always toward mercy. No amount of cunning or force
can escape this intentionality of God. The rhetoric of Israel about the nations
is rooted in the very character of Israel's God. The very character of God,
however, lives in this rhetoric, which is not negotiable. The rhetoric assures
that God is bound to Babylon even in the work of mercy. The rhetoric assures
as well that Babylon is bound to mercy, because it is the purpose of this God
who gives power to whom God wills. Nebuchadnezzar persistently has
refused this reality of God's powerful resolve for mercy. His rule culminates
in sanity, praise, majesty, splendor, and more greatness—however, only when
he accepts God's rule of justice and abandons the option of autonomous
pride. Nebuchadnezzar's reason is his "knowing," knowing the truth of Israel's
rhetoric and knowing the one who is the primal subject of that rhetoric.

IV

I want now to situate my comments in relation to two addresses by distin-
guished occupants of this presidential office. I suggest that a contrast
between the presidential addresses of James Muilenburg and Elizabeth
Schüssler Fiorenza will illuminate the claim I am making for the theological
intentionality of Israel's rhetoric.

On the one hand, my esteemed and beloved teacher James Muilenburg
delivered his remarkable paper on rhetoric criticism in 1968.[23] It is among
the most influential addresses—arguably the most influential—in the history
of this office. It was Muilenburg who both noted and, in my view, enacted the
decisive methodological turn in the guild toward literary analysis. One can
hardly overstate the cruciality of what Muilenburg accomplished in his
address, and more generally in his work.

Nonetheless, it is fair to say that Muilenburg's presentation of the impor-
tance of speech and of rhetoric was quite restricted. There is no hint in his
presidential address of an awareness that speech is characteristically and
inevitably a political act, an assertion of power that seeks to override some
other rhetorical proposal of reality.[24] One can rightly say of Muilenburg's
horizon either that he was not interested in such issues or that the whole
critical awareness of the political dimension of speech came much later to
our discipline. In any case, it is time to move beyond such innocence in
rhetorical criticism, as many in our field have done, to an awareness that the

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[22] On this phrase, see Gowan, *When Man Becomes God*, 121–28, and its use in Jer 50:44.

[23] James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 87 (1969) 1–18.

[24] On the political dimension of all rhetoric, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory, An Intro-duction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); and Richard Harvey Brown, *Society as Text: Essays on Rhetoric, Reason, and Reality* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987). Eagleton insists that traditional literary criticism has always refused to think of "the 'aesthetic' as separable from social determinants" (p. 206).

text entrusted to us is a major act of power. Our own interpretation is derivatively an act of power even as we pose, or perhaps especially as we pose, as objective in our interpretation. One can detect Muilenburg's lack of interest or attention to this issue at the end of his address, when, in juxta-position to T. S. Eliot's phrase "raid on the inarticulate," he speaks of a "raid on the ultimate." I suggest that such a formulation bespeaks a kind of untroubled transcendentalism. Of course Muilenburg was not untroubled, and he knew the text was not untroubled. Nonetheless, he moves directly from the text to "the ultimate." Given what we know of the political power of rhetoric, we dare not speak of a "raid on the ultimate" unless we first speak of a "raid on the proximate."[25]

There are available to us a variety of theories of speech and rhetoric. The move beyond Muilenburg's innocent analysis of rhetoric can benefit from Jean-François Lyotard's presence in the conversation.[26] Lyotard suggests that speech is fundamentally agonistic, that it intends to enter into conflict with other speech claims. One figure he uses for this agonistic understanding is that speech is like the taking of tricks, the trumping of a communicational adversary, an assertively conflictual relation between tricksters.[27]

Without following Lyotard's complete postmodern program, I suggest that in the Society of Biblical Literature we shall more fully face the danger and significance of the texts entrusted to us, if we notice how these texts enter into conflict with other rhetorical options. Concerning my theme of *mercy and empire,* the several texts I have cited and their shared rhetorical claim do not constitute an innocent, neutral, or casual act. In each case the text is a deliberate act of combat against other views of public reality which live through other forms of rhetoric. Thus the "trump" of this rhetoric seeks to override the assured autonomy of Babylon which dares to say, "I am and there is no other" (Isa 47:10). Conversely, this rhetoric enters into combat with Israel's rhetoric of complaint, which asserts that "there is none to comfort" (Lam 1:2, 17, 21); "the hand of the Lord is shortened" (Isa 50:2; 59:1) and "my

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[25] Eagleton writes: "Rhetoric, which was the received form of critical analysis all the way from ancient society to the eighteenth century, examined the way discourses are constructed in order to achieve certain effects. . . . Its particular interest lay in grasping such practices as forms of power and performance" (*Literary Theory,* 205). Muilenburg's focus on the "ultimate" may not give sufficient attention to "power and performance."

[26] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) xi, 10, 16, and *passim.*

[27] Lyotard's strictures are aimed especially against Jürgen Habermas's theory of "communi-cative action." On the latter, see Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon, 1968); and the utilization of Habermas by Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Rela-tivism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983). Lyotard holds that speech is much more adversarial than Habermas allows. I am suggesting that such an adversarial perspective is helpful in understanding what the rhetoric of Israel does con-cerning great concentrations of political power and the mandate of mercy. These texts we have considered are in no way innocent about their claims.

way is hid from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God" (Isa 40:27). Both the arrogance of autonomous Babylon and the despair of doubting Israel generate, authorize, and commend a politics of brutality and intimidation.

The rhetorical trajectory I have traced refuses to leave either Israel or the empire at peace in its mistaken rhetoric. This counterrhetoric, this "strong poetry," which seeks to reread the empire and the faith community is a radically subversive urging.[28] Aside from the specific argument I have made about *empire and mercy*, I suggest that our scholarly work requires a theory of rhetoric that is more in keeping with the relentlessly critical, subversive, and ironic voice of the text which sets itself endlessly against more conventional and consensual speech. Thus we are at a moment not only "beyond form criticism," which Muilenburg had judged to be flat and mostly sterile, but also beyond rhetorical analysis, which is too enamored of style to notice speech as a means and source of power.[29]

On the other hand, in 1987, nineteen years after Muilenburg, Professor Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza delivered a major challenge to the society.[30] Alluding to the presidential addresses of James Montgomery in 1919, Henry Cadbury in 1937, and Leroy Waterman in 1947 as the only exceptions in presidential addresses, Fiorenza protested against scholarly detachment and urged that members of the society have public responsibility in the midst of their scholarship.[31] She proposed that attention to rhetorical rather than scientific categories of scholarship would raise ethical-political issues as constitutive of the interpretive process. Moreover, she observed that no presidential address since 1947 had made any gesture in the direction of public responsibility.

It is not my purpose to enter directly into an assessment of previous presidential addresses. It is, however, my purpose to reflect on the task and possibility of biblical theology. The dominant line of scholarly argument has insisted that biblical theology must be a descriptive and not a normative enterprise. Or to put it with Stendahl, it must be concerned with what the

[28] My reference here of course is to Harold Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). See William H. Rueckert, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963) 8–33, on Burke's early notion of rhetoric as counterstatement and counterdiscourse.

[29] In reflecting on my critique of Professor Muilenburg, it occurred to me (and may to others), that my own statement appears to be an attempt to "trump" the influence of Muilenburg, thus to enact myself the force of rhetoric as Bloom and Lyotard suggest. That is, of course, far from my intention, but I am not unaware of that dynamic. Perhaps it could be suggested that the assignment of a presidential paper invites some such procedure.

[30] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Interpretation: De-Centering Biblical Scholarship," *JBL* 107 (1988) 3–17.

[31] The addresses to which Fiorenza alludes are James A. Montgomery, "Present Tasks of American Biblical Scholarship," *JBL* 38 (1919) 1–14; Henry J. Cadbury, "Motives of Biblical Scholarship," *JBL* 56 (1937) 1–16; and Leroy Waterman, "Biblical Studies in a New Setting," *JBL* 66 (1947) 1–14.

text "meant" and not with what the text "means."[32] In my judgment, that urging contains within it not only a considerable fear of authoritarianism but also a decision about "strict constructionism" concerning the text, a pre-occupation with "authorial intent," and a positivistic notion of rhetoric, image, metaphor, and finally of text.

If we move in Muilenburg's direction of rhetoric and in Fiorenza's direction of public rhetoric, and if we understand that the rhetoric of a classic text is always and again a political act, then it is, in my judgment, impossible to confine interpretation to a descriptive activity. The text, when we attend to it as a serious act of rhetoric, is inherently agonistic and makes its advocacy in the face of other advocacies.

The trajectory of texts I have cited may be taken as a case in point. There is no doubt that the primary references in these texts are the God of Israel and the Babylonian empire, a datable, locatable, identifiable historical entity. There is also no doubt, however, that the term "Babylon" has become a metaphor for great public power and that the term spills over endlessly into new contexts. A primary example of such spilling over is the power of the metaphor "Babylon" in the book of Revelation. The Babylon metaphor has exercised enormous influence in the church's thinking about "church and state." There is no doubt that that spilling over happens in the text itself and, as W. S. Towner has shown, that spillover has continued in any but the most flattened historical interpretation.[33] Thus we never have in the text the concrete historical reference to Babylon without at the same time the potential for spillover into other contexts. That spillover, I suggest, is not evoked simply by willful, imaginative interpreters, but is also rooted in the meta-phors and images themselves, which reach out in relentless sense making.[34]

Thus we have before us in these six texts concern for the God of Israel, who is the God of mercy, and the empire, which must be endlessly concerned

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[32] Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," *IDB* 1. 418–32. See the careful and critical response to the categories of Stendahl by Ben C. Ollenburger, "Biblical Theology: Situating the Discipline," in *Understanding the Word* (ed. James T. Butler et al.; JSOTSup 37; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985) 37–62, and more fully in "What Krister Stendahl 'Meant'—A Normative Critique of Descriptive Biblical Theology," *HBT* 8 (1986) 61–98.

[33] Towner, "Were the English Puritans 'the Saints of the Most High?'" (n. 17 above). Robert P. Carroll observes that Babylon has become "the symbol of hubristic opposition to Yahweh" (*Jeremiah*, 832). For an amazing example of such a spillover into contemporaneity, see Octavio Paz, *One Earth, Four or Five Worlds: Reflections on Contemporary History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985) 151. In commenting on the power of the U.S. in the Latin American countries, Paz writes: "This contradiction revealed that the ambivalence of the giant was not imaginary but real: the country of Thoreau was also the country of Rossevelt-Nebuchadnezzar."

[34] On the notion of spillover, I am utilizing the notion of Paul Ricoeur concerning "surplus" (*Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* [Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976]). The term "surplus" as a noun is too static, however, and so I have chosen an active verb to suggest that the text actively moves beyond its intended or ostensive meaning to other meanings.

with mercy. In attending to these texts, we seek to enter Israel's rhetoric and to notice Israel's agonistic intent in this set of metaphors. We read the text where we are. We read the text, as we are bound to read it, in the horizon of China's Tiananmen Square and Berlin's Wall, of Panama's Canal and South Africa's apartheid, of Kuwait's lure of oil. Or, among us, when we are daring, we may read the text in relation to the politics of publication, the play of power in promotion and tenure, the ambiguities of grantsmanship, and the seductions of institutional funding. We inevitably read the text where we sit. What happens in the act of theological interpretation is not an "application" of the text, nor an argument about contemporary policy, but an opened rhetorical field in which an urgent voice other than our own is set in the midst of imperial self-sufficiency and "colonial" despair.[35] We continue to listen while the voice of this text has its say against other voices which claim counterauthority.

Thus the agenda that Schüssler Fiorenza proposes is not an agenda extrinsic to the work of the Society. The spillover of the text into present social reality is not an "add-on" for relevance, but it is a scholarly responsibility that the text should have a hearing as a serious voice on its own terms. One need subscribe to no particular ideology to conclude that our public condition is one of deep crisis. Since we have invested our lives in these texts, one may ask directly how or in what way this text is an important voice in the contemporary array of competing rhetorics. Less directly, one may ask if we want to be the generation that withholds the text from its contemporary context, the generation that blocks the spillover that belongs intrinsically and inherently to the text. It is possible that we would be the generation that withholds the text from our contemporary world in the interest of objectivity and in the name of our privileged neutrality. Such an act, I should imagine, is a disservice not only to our time and place but also to our text. Such "objective" and "neutral" readings are themselves political acts in the service of entrenched and "safe" interpretation.

It can, however, be otherwise. Without diminishing the importance of our critical work, it is possible that the text will be permitted freedom for its own fresh say. That, it seems to me, is a major interpretive issue among us. The possibility of a fresh reading requires attentiveness to the politics of rhetoric, to the strange, relentless power of these words to subvert and astonish.[36]

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[35] Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky provide convenient phrasing for this context in their formulas "The Center is Complacent, The Border is Alarmed" (*Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technical and Environmental Dangers* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982] 83–125).

[36] On fresh and liberated readings, see William A. Beardslee, "Ethics and Hermeneutics," in *Text and Logos: The Humanistic Interpretation of the New Testament* (ed. Theodore W. Jennings; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990) 15–32. Beardslee concludes his proposal for a reading of the text that will permit a "relational, participatory view of justice," with this comment: "This path will move away from the rigid image of hermeneutics as 'translation,' which presupposes a fixed

When our criticism allows the rhetoric of the text to be voiced, the way mercy crowds Babylon continues to be a crucial oddity, even in our own reading. Those of us who care most about criticism may attend with greater grace to readings of the text that move even beyond our criticism.

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element to be re-expressed. It will contribute to the formation of a hermeneutics that can fully recognize the strangeness of the text, which offers no 'pure' disclosure, and yet can release the ethical power that successive generations have found in an encounter with the New Testament." Beardslee's proposal is congruent with what I see happening in these "mercy/Babylon" texts.