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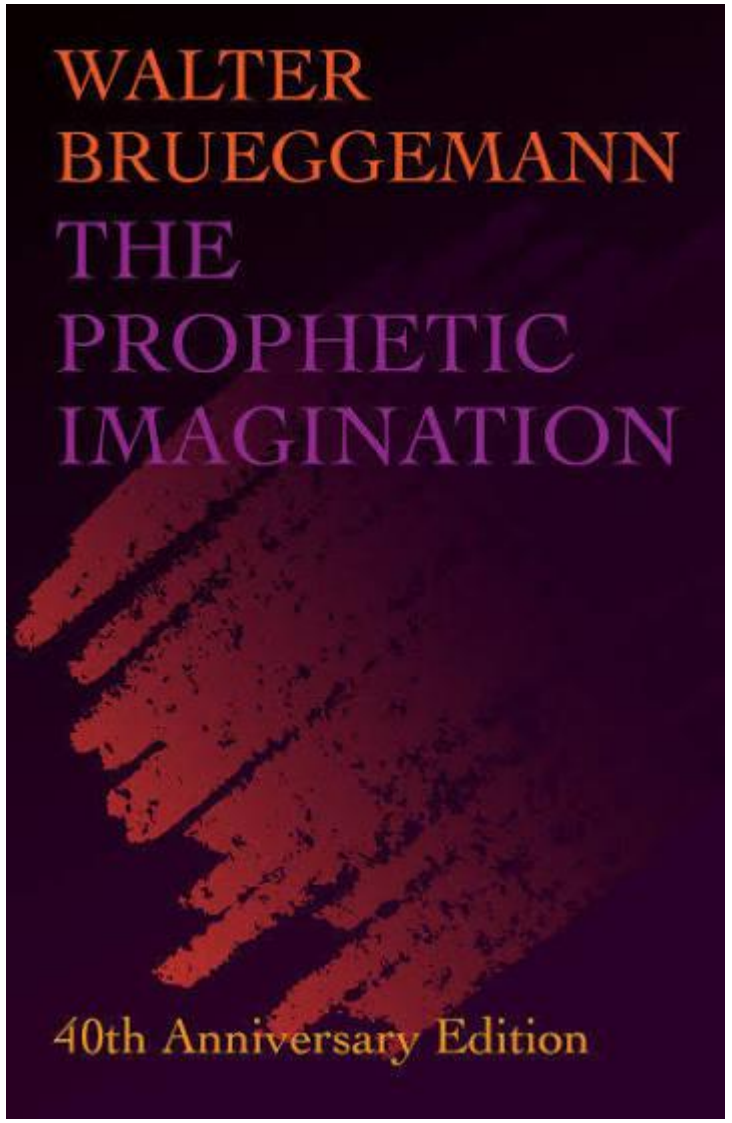
Prophetic Witness



Fall 2026
Week 4
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Thanks, Rev. Dr. Joey Shelton

The Alternative Community of Moses continued…

The alternative consciousness wrought through Moses is characterized by:

1. Criticizing:
    a. the power of the dominant culture is shown to be fraudulent
    b. begins with the capacity to grieve
2. Energizing

(p.9)

Prophetic Criticism:

The ***narrative of the Exodus*** is designed to show the ***radical criticism*** and ***radical delegitimizing*** of the Egyptian Empire. (p.9)

a. the power of the dominant culture is shown to be fraudulent

Exodus 5 Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.” 2 But Pharaoh said, “Who is the Lord, that I should listen to him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go.” 3 Then they said, “The God of the Hebrews has revealed himself to us; let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God, or he will fall upon us with pestilence or sword.” 4 But the king of Egypt said to them, “Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labors!” 5 Pharaoh continued, “Now they are more numerous than the people of the land and yet you want them to stop laboring!” 6 That same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people, as well as their supervisors, 7 “You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. 8 But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously; do not diminish it, for they are lazy; that is why they cry, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to our God.’ 9 Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will pay attention to it and not to deceptive words.”

10 So the taskmasters and the supervisors of the people went out and said to the people, “Thus says Pharaoh: I will not give you straw. 11 Go and get straw yourselves, wherever you can find it, but your work will not be lessened in the least.” 12 So the people scattered throughout the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw. 13 The taskmasters urged them on, saying, “Complete your work, the same daily assignment as when you were given straw.” 14 And the Israelite supervisors whom Pharaoh’s taskmasters had set over them were beaten and were asked, “Why did you not finish the required quantity of bricks yesterday and today, as you did before?”

15 Then the Israelite supervisors came to Pharaoh and cried, “Why do you treat your servants like this? 16 No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, ‘Make bricks!’ Look how your servants are beaten! But the fault is with you.” 17 He said, “You are lazy, lazy; that is why you say, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.’ 18 Go now and work, for no straw shall be given you, but you shall still deliver the same number of bricks.” 19 The Israelite supervisors saw that they were in trouble when they were told, “You shall not lessen your daily number of bricks.” 20 As they left Pharaoh, they came upon Moses and Aaron, who were waiting to meet them. 21 They said to them, “The Lord look upon you and judge! You have brought us into bad odor with Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.”

22 Then Moses turned to the Lord and said, “O my Lord, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me? 23 Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people, and you have done nothing at all to deliver your people.” NRSVUE

At the beginning the Egyptians are in full flower and full power.
They "will and deal" and are subject to none (p.9):

5:7-10 *"You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. 8 But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously; do not diminish it, for they are lazy; that is why they cry, 'Let us go and sacrifice to our God.' 9 Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will pay attention to it and not to deceptive words."*

10 *So the taskmasters and the supervisors of the people went out and said to the people, "Thus says Pharaoh: I will not give you straw."* NRSVUE

Notice how the language is shaped to evoke anger and bring to expression the deep resentment at this whole system. (p.10)

But the story moves. At the end, these same masters, taskmasters, and foremen are vanquished, humiliated, and banished from history (p.10):

Ex. 14:13 *But Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today, for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again*. NRSVUE

Ex. 14:30 *Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore*. NRSVUE

The narrative shows, with **delighted lingering**, how the *politics of oppression* is overcome by the *practice of justice and compassion*. (p.10)

…the moment of dismantling is the plague cycle… it testifies to what cannot be explained… (p.10):

> Plague 1: Aaron's staff becomes a snake. Egyptian wise men, magicians, and sorcerers also turn staffs into snakes by "their secret acts". Aaron's snake swallows Egyptian snakes. Pharoah has a hard heart. (Ex. 7:8-13)
>
> Plague 2: Aaron's staff strikes the waters of the Nile; waters turn to blood; fish die; river stinks. People can't drink the water. Egyptian magicians by "secret arts" do the same. Pharoah has a hard heart. (Ex. 7:20-24)

In the first two plagues… the powerful work of Moses and Aaron is matched by Egyptian "research and development" people. Two plagues into the scene nothing has changed and the power of Egypt is not challenged. The empire knows how to play "anything you can do, I can do better." (p.10)

> Plague 3: Aaron's staff strikes the dust. Dust becomes gnats; gnats cover humans and animals. Magicians' secret arts could not produce gnats! Egyptian magicians claim to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God!" Pharoah has a hard heart. (8:17-18)

The Egyptian empire could not! The gods of Egypt could not! The scientists of the regime could not! The imperial religion was dead! The politics of oppression had failed! That is **the ultimate criticism, that the assured and alleged power of the dominant culture is now shown to be fraudulent.** Criticism is not carping and denouncing. It is asserting that false claims to authority and power cannot keep their promises, which they could not in the face of the free God. It is only a matter of time until they are dead on the seashore.

Prophetic Criticism:

The narrative of the Exodus is designed to show the ***radical criticism*** and ***radical delegitimizing*** of the Egyptian Empire. (p.9)

a. the power of the dominant culture is shown to be fraudulent
b. begins with the capacity to grieve

- Prophetic criticism begins with the **capacity to grieve**:

…the narrative of liberation begins with the grieving complaint of Israel (p.11):

23 …*The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out. Their cry for help rose up to God from their slavery. 24 God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. 25 God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.*(Ex. 2:23-25)

… The real criticism begins in the capacity to grieve because that is the most visceral announcement that things are not right… As long as the empire can keep the pretense alive that things are all right, there will be no real grieving and no serious criticism. (p.11)

But think what happens if the Exodus is the primal scream that permits the beginning of history. In the verb "cry out"(*za'ak*) there is a bit of ambiguity because on the one hand it is a cry of misery and wretchedness with some self-pity, while it also functions for the official filing of a legal complaint… Israel does not voice resignation but instead expresses a militant sense of being wronged with the powerful expectation that it will be heard and answered. Thus the history of Israel begins on the day when its people no longer address the Egyptian gods who will not listen and cannot answer. The life of freedom and justice comes when they risk the freedom of the free God against the regime. (pp.11-12)

Bringing hurt to public expression is an important first step in the *dismantling criticism* that permits a new reality, theological and social, to emerge. **That cry which begins history is acknowledged by Yahweh as history gathers power** (p.12)**:**

Ex. 3:7-10 *Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."* NRSVUE

By the middle of the plague cycle Israel has disengaged from the empire, cries no more to it, expects nothing of it, acknowledges it in no way, knows it cannot keep its promises, and knows that nothing is either owed it or expected of it. That is **the ultimate criticism which leads to dismantling.**

… The grieving cry learns to turn away from false listeners and turn toward the one who can help. *Prophetic criticism consists in mobilizing people to their real restless grief and in nurturing them away from cry-hearers who are inept at listening and indifferent in response*. Surely history consists primarily of speaking and being answered, crying and being heard. If that is true, it means there can be no history in the empire because the cries are never heard and the speaking is never answered. And if the task of prophecy is to empower people to engage in history, then it means evoking cries that expect answers, learning to address them where they will be taken seriously, and ceasing to look to the numbed and dull empire that never intended to answer in the first place. (pp. 12-13)

As the narrative develops, even the mighty empire cries out (p.13):

Ex. 11:6 *Then there will be a loud cry throughout the whole land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again.*

Ex. 12:30 *Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his officials and all the Egyptians, and there was a loud cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead.*

The cry of Israel becomes an empowering cry; the cry of Egypt is one of dismantling helplessness. But it is too late. History has begun, and the initiative has been taken by the new God for the new community. (p.13)

The empire is left to grieve over its days of not caring and its gods of order and its politics of injustice, which are all now ended. Criticism has reached its goal.(p.14)