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JABEZ: A MAN NAMED PAIN: AN INTEGRATIVE HERMENEUTICAL EXERCISE

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Hermeneutics, the Bible and Barth

A kind of holy unrest is brewing in biblical scholarship today. Camps are mingling, walls are coming down, the old labels aren't working so well anymore.[1] The causes are many: ecumenism, spiritual hunger, a renewed respect for the genuine wisdom of the ancients, a growing humility toward the limitations of the scientific method. Whatever the cause, it is no longer enough to speak only of the historical setting of the text, the original audience, authorship, or date. Nor is it enough to read the Bible with a fideistic literalism, or as an esoteric analogue in which nothing means what it says because everything means something else. It is not enough to analyze the Bible as if it were merely another book, for to do so is to ignore the claims the Bible makes of itself.[2] What then is a responsible hermeneutic of scripture?

The current struggle in biblical hermeneutics reflects the struggle in Christian theology. The stuggle is, to borrow William Thompson's words, to put back into biblical studies and Christian theology the "soul" which has been demythologized nigh unto death.[3] That soul is the very Spirit of Christ.

The struggle is not new. It emerged in this century most vigorously in the work of Karl Barth, whose response to Protestant liberalism and fundamentalism was neoorthodoxy—a return to the best of the old while reaching out for the best of the new.[4] For Barth, the centrality of Christ is the foundation for biblical hermeneutics. In many ways he is a man for our time, as we struggle to hear what the Bible says.

The Bible audaciously claims to be the written word of God for the people of God. Both Old and New Testaments are the written means through which the Holy Spirit reveals Jesus Christ to the church.[5] This is the central conviction of Barth. While Barth welcomes the tools of historical-critical scholarship, literary criticism and typological reading, and so on, his overall concern is that readers submit themselves to the claims made by the Word of God encountered in the text.[6] All tools of scholarship are to serve the reader in that task.

The essay that follows is an exercise in (primarily) Barthian hermeneutics. It combines scholarly exegesis and hermeneutics in a way that exalts Jesus Christ and submits the author to the claims of Jesus Christ made

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through the text. I have deliberately avoided pedantic labels for each hermeneutical movement to notify the reader that "we will now incorporate Ricoeur's second naiveté" or "here is an example of Tracy's conversation model" and so on. Instead I have endeavored to combine naturally and conversationally the fruits of historical-critical research with those of literary criticism and hermeneutics, drawing from the insights of psychology, spirituality and the wisdom of the saints. Footnotes are plentiful enough for the reader who wishes to catalogue and list such things. In this particular essay to have made such notations within the text would have seemed akin to a composer interrupting the performance of her overture every few measures to explain to the audience precisely how she was influenced by this musician or that poet in each section of music. My goal is to integrate and orchestrate a diverse array of voices concerning the text, in order to better hear what the Holy Spirit is saying through the text, so that my reader may also hear. This is a Barthian approach.[7]

Part Two of the essay is developed in four progressions which are named after the four steps of *lectio divina*.[8] This has been done to emphasize the foundational role of "listening" prayer in a responsible interpretation of the Bible.[9] First we encounter the text itself, nakedly, unhurriedly. The text should be read several times before consulting secondary sources so that it can speak for itself before others speak about it. This step is *lectio*.

Then we begin to listen in earnest not only to the text but also to the voices of others who converse with the text. For the Holy Spirit speaks to us in concert. Questions arise for the reader in the process of listening and speaking, which lead to an awareness of particular words, images, or themes from the text that seem to stand out.[10] This second step is *oratio*.

Meditatio comes next. In it there is a "descent from the mind into the heart," as our Eastern Orthodox friends would say, of the particular word, phrase or theme that has been heard. There the conversation grows more intimate, more fecund, more *theological*, perhaps less verbal. All that has been heard in the text and in the conversation must percolate in the heart, fueled with Spirit fire. When this truly happens, the text begets a Word that is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."[11] The word of life that has been spoken must now be internalized and lived out. This is *contemplatio*, the overflowing fullness of prayer. As Barth would say, in this part we submit ourselves and our lives to the Word's decision about us.[12] Unless Bible study leads to obedience to the Word, it is fruitless. *Contemplatio* is the final obedience, the glad surrender of oneself to the transforming Word. It is worship.

Like Barth, my conviction is that the Holy Spirit speaks in concert

through all these voices—the biblical text, scholars, saints,[13] reasoned reflection and our own life experiences—if we will only listen. The Bible, when taken in isolation from the other voices, becomes dry and lifeless, or worse, an instrument for unbridled eisegesis. The other voices without the Bible are like a compass without the needle. If, on the other hand we approach the text on our knees, listening with all our might to the Holy Spirit speaking in community, the compass leads us home. The text that I have chosen seems particularly apt for this endeavor, for it seems as dead and dry as ever a text could be, at first reading. It is an old, forgotten passage, buried in a lengthy genealogy, left out of the lectionaries and unmentioned in the hymns. I stumbled across it several years ago while methodically reading through 1 Chronicles, a practice I learned from Betty, the pastor who taught me to "pray the scriptures." She was childlike enough to believe that every word of the Bible trembles with incipient life for those who have ears to hear. This brief text has become a "living word" for me, which continues to form my spirituality and to fuel my passion for God. I hear it speak fresh wisdom with each new reading. Barth would be pleased. So would Betty.

I invite the reader, on that note, to approach these humble musings in the spirit in which they were written, with a kind of holy listening and a playful heart. Perhaps you, too, will be found and "read" by the Word. Who knows what might happen next?

Part Two

Lectio

> Jabez was honored more than his brothers; and his mother named him Jabez, saying, "Because I bore him in pain." Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, "Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!" And God granted what he asked (1 Chronicles 4:9-10 NRSV)

Meditatio

In these two brief verses we find the summary of a man's entire life: an epitaph. This memorial of Jabez's life is carefully woven into a lengthy genealogy. The epitaph is a narrative containing both a prayer of supplication and at least the suggestion of a curse. Thus we find in this short text no fewer

than four genres. The primary literary forms of Chronicles are genealogies, lists, sermons or speeches, prayers, and a curious "unnamed genre" that is a somewhat midrashic narrative plus interpretation.[14] What we have in 4:9-10, then, is actually a literary microcosm of 1 Chronicles as a whole.

While much could be said concerning the nature and function of genealogies in the OT, for our purposes it is enough to note that the Chronicler[15] probably intended to survey "all Israel" in order to emphasize the continuity of God's presence among God's people through all times, even during national catastrophies such as the Exile.[16] The first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles traces the chosen people of God from Adam and Eve to the Exile under Nebuchadnezzar. It is necessary to the writer for the audience to connect themselves with generations of past Hebrews, particularly the line of Judah, for their sense of identity has been compromised by captivity.[17] While Jabez is located in the genealogy of the tribe of Judah his precise relationship within the lineage is unclear.[18] The purpose for his inclusion will be readily apparent in light of the author's themes and method.

The post-exilic Chronicler, writing during the late fifth century B.C., is a court historian who writes from a priestly perspective. Both political and religious motives prompt him to write. In focusing on Judah the Chronicler wishes to highlight the positive aspects of the Davidic monarchy. Particular weight is given to the eschatalogical hopes associated with the Davidic line.[19] Concerned with preserving the hope of Israel which is to come through David's line, the author exalts those who call on the Lord and submit their lives to his sovereignty. He uses them to demonstrate the connection between faithfulness to God and the fulfillment of Israel's hope.

The temple cultus, priests and Levites, the doctrine of retribution and the condition of the human heart are primary theological themes in Chronicles. Kings are described in terms of their relationship to the temple and to God.[20] With their theology kings rise and fall, taking Levites, priests, and Israel with them. Second Chronicles concludes with the decree of Cyrus which permits the exiles to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple.

While a number of theories have been proposed, the most probable original audience for Chronicles was "the author's own community and its purpose was to assure them of the value of their life, even under foreign rule: they as a community are sustaining the worship of God, which is the primary function of Israel, indeed, the chief purpose of the world's creation."[21] The remnant has come home to carry out its mission of living as the people of God. Will Israel learn from its past? That is the author's question.

Along with other epitaphs[22] in Chronicles, the mini-narrative of Jabez serves the author's purpose. Most of the Chronicler's theological themes are found in this story. Jabez is from the line of Judah. He is an honorable man

despite the limitations of his life. Like Israelite children born in exile, Jabez is born under a curse. The saving grace that lifts him from the curse is his trust in God, which prompts him to seek a blessing. God rewards Jabez for his faith. His story of hope and redemption could become the story of any Israelite who calls on the name of the Lord. It could become the story of all Israel.

What is most striking about Jabez' story is that his name is represented as a kind of curse placed on him by his mother.[23] With a bitter word-play Jabez' mother names him after her suffering. (The Hebrew word for pain is "atseb.")[24] We know nothing else about Jabez' mother except that she suffers. For the ancient Hebrew reader it is understood that a negative spiritual force is released upon Jabez in his mother's naming of him. "For the Hebrew just as a word was not a mere sound on the lips but an agent sent forth, so the spoken curse was an active agent for hurt. Behind the word stands the soul that created it."[25]

While the text itself does not say how Jabez experienced the curse, the implication is that his pain caused him to cry out to God for deliverance. It seems clear that Jabez would not pray for God to bless and protect him from pain and suffering (the curse of his name) if he was not threatened in some way by pain. Neither would he pray for his borders to "be enlarged" if he was not in some way confined. Was his confinement geographic, emotional, spiritual, relational? We cannot be certain, but there are hints in the text.

Notice the nuanced phrase: "he was more honored than his brothers." Was Jabez, like Joseph, the target of his brothers' abuse? Was he a younger brother like David, honored yet rejected, anointed but hunted down? The text does not tell us. What it does suggest is that he was favorably singled out from his brothers by the community. Sibling rivalry and resentment from the less-favored brethren is a *lietmotif* in OT narratives: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, the list goes on. Could it be that his brothers were part of Jabez' pain?

Even though he is born under a curse, Jabez is exemplary in his faith. He turns to God who has the power to uncurse. Jabez cries out to be delivered from pain. Instead of allowing his suffering to make him "curse God and die," he lets it lead him closer to God.[26] Furthermore he asks for a blessing, the kind of blessing his mother did not give him, the kind that a good mother gives. Jabez' prayer is the most important thing he does. It is the essence of who he is. It is the secret to his liberation from the curse. God's word to Jabez is "Yes."

Oratio

Jabez stands as a testimony to God's grace for all who are born under

a curse, under an "evil word." Jabez is incarnate hope for those whose identity is defined by their parents' pain. His story is about the power of prayer, the power of the word of blessing, the mighty "Yes!" of God. To Jabez, God reveals himself as Redeemer, the one who becomes Healer, Protector and Life-giver. God becomes the mother Jabez never had, speaking the blessing Jabez needs. Jabez discovers that evil that is passed "from generation to generation"[27] is no match for the redeeming, blessing Word of God. A new life is possible for anyone.

Let us come alongside Jabez on his journey, and eat of Jabez' bread. For many of us, in the words of the old spiritual, "feel like a motherless child." God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and omniman. The ball and chain of woundedness, that peculiar shame of being which was handed on to us, will not be broken by the Warrior or the Judge. The key to our unshackling is the blessed face of Mother, the ferocious protection, the sweet kiss of Mother love.

"Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?" God asks his people.[28] Yes, Jabez answers. A mother can do such a thing. "Even these may forget," God answers, "yet I will not forget you...I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands. Your walls are continually before me."[29] Jabez looks at the scarred, outstretched hands of Mother God, reaching inside the walls, deeper than the pain, the memories, the everything. "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you," whispers Jesus,[30] bending low to lift his child to his breast.

"For this is that property in God which opposes good to evil," writes Julian. "So Jesus Christ, who opposes good to evil, is our true Mother. We have our being from him, where the foundation of motherhood begins, with all the sweet protection of love which endlessly follows."[31] For every Jabez among us Jesus offers words of blessing: "This is my body, which is given for you."[32] "I came that you may have life," Jesus insists, "and have it abundantly."[33]

Mother Jesus is our "Pelican," the one who feeds us with herself for she is the one who bore us, who nurses us, and who leads us in the way of life:

> *Pie pelicane, Jesu Domine, me immundum munda tuo sanguine,cuius una stilla salvum facere, totum mundum quit ab omni scelere.*[34]

The Word Become Flesh is the Word of uncursing to all who will receive. Christ is God's glad "Yes!" to deliver us from destruction and to transform our suffering into joy. For it is Jesus' deepest joy to bless us:

> Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a

> curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.[35]

Jabez is all of us, we who are born laboring under the first mother's pain, we who are the seed of Adam. Jabez is creation, groaning beneath the weight of multiplied sin. Jabez is the universe crying for release. Thanks be to God for the mighty Word of hope:

> All creation anticipates the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And even we Christians, although we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, also groan to be released from pain and suffering. We, too, wait anxiously for that day when God will give us our full rights as his children, including the new bodies he has promised us.[36]

Jabez is beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, a garment of praise for a spirit of heaviness.[37] He is promise.

Contemplatio

Not for myself alone, beloved Word Incarnate, do I lift my life in trembling gratitude for all that you have done to lift me from the pit of evil, from generations and generations of violence and shame, from selfhoods forged in Mama's pain. Not for myself alone do I weep these tears of joy. Your Word is alive, sharper than a scythe, sharp-honed wisdom won from living into wholeness, the freedom of the Word. Your Word swells large within me, sweet frankincense and myrrh, a living Word of blessing which you speak to all the world.

Endnotes

[1]A new kind of "conversation" is emerging that is decidedly postmodern in its acceptance of the ambiguities both in scripture and in biblical hermeneutics. David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), ix.

[2]2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21.

[3]William M. Thompson, *The Struggle for Theology's Soul* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 1-32.

[4]Of course, Barth himself did not like to be pigeonholed within neo-orthodoxy.

[5]Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, vol. 2, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1056), 882-883.

[6]Ibid., 702, 723-727.

[7]Mark I. Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Recoeur, and the New Yale Theology*, Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics Series, vol. 6 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990), 1-26.

[8]*Lectio divina* is commonly

[9]Barth, 697ff.

[10]The reader brings to the text his or her experiences, knowledge, questions, opinions, limitations, fears, hopes, all the conscious and unconscious material of life. Thus the questions and issues are dynamic, growing and changing with the reader's growth. For a fine introduction to a psychological hermeneutic of the Bible that draws from Jungian analysis, Barth and others see Wayne G. Rollins, *Jung and the Bible* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983). Rollins speaks particularly of Barth on pp. 86, 98, 106, 115.

[11]Hebrews 4:12, NRSV.

[12]Barth, 702-703.

[13]I speak not only of canonized saints and "official sages" but also of the saints in the local church-the lovers of Jesus who know God intimately and who serve as companions on the journey.

[14]Roddy Braun, *1 Chronicles*, Word Biblical Commentary Series, vol. 14 (Waco: Word Books, 1982), xxiv.

[15]Tradition says the author was Ezra, but parts of the text suggest a much later writing, perhaps around 400 B.C. 1 and 2 Chronicles are one book, the final book in the Hebrew Bible.

[16]Braun, 3.

[17]cf. Ezra and Nehemiah.

[18]Jabez story is an example of the combination of local tribal history with a more formal genealogy (ibid., 4-5). The only other biblical mention of Jabez is 1 Chron 2:55, which names Jabez as the city occupied by the descendants of Hur (through Salma's line).

[19]Braun, xxxii-xv.

[20]1 Chron 10:1-29:30 follows the reign of David, while 2 Chron 1:1-9:31 is a commentary on the reign of Solomon, followed by 10:1-36:23 which details the remainder of the kings up to the captivity.

[21]David Cliines, "Secondary History," in *Harper's Bible Commentary* [CD-ROM} (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc. 1988; Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

[22]1 Chron 2:3, for example, remembers Er the son of Judah as a wicked man whom the Lord killed.

[23]J.A. Motyer, "Curse," and A. Van Selms, "Balaam," *New Bible Dictionary* 2nd ed [CD-ROM] (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1982; Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

[24]We find a similar phenomenon in Hosea, where the prophet is commanded by Yahweh to name his children "Jezreel" (God Plants), "Loruhama" (Not Loved" and "Lo-ammi" (Not My People). Recall the naming of Jacob (Deceiver) and how he lived his name. The theme of the power of naming runs throughout the Bible.

[25] A. Van Selms, "Balaam," *New Bible Dictionary* 2nd ed [CD-ROM] (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1982; Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

[26]Job 2:9.

[27]Ex 34:7.

[28]Is 49:15a, NRSV.

[29]Is 49:15b-16, NRSV.

[30]Is 66:13, NRSV.

[31]Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, Classics of Western Spirituality Series, trans. Edmund College and James Walsh (New York: Paulist, 1978), 295.

[32]Luke 22:19, NRSV.

[33]John 10:10, NRSV.

[34]"Deign, O Jesus, Pelican of heaven, me, a sinner, in Thy Blood to lave, to a single dro p of which is given all the world from all its sin to save." Stanza 6 of the 13th century Eucharistic hymn by Thomas Aquinas, "Adoro Te Devote," *Jubilate Deo*, Casa Musicale Edizione (Bergamo, Italy: Carrara, 1980).

[35]Gal 3:13-14, NRSV.

[36]Romans 8:20-23, NLT.

[37]Isaiah 61:3.