Letters on Political Theology

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A note on the context of this document:
Over many years I have offered a once-a-week, two and a half hour, undergraduate -sophomore only- seminar on political theology, which devoted half a semester to reading the Hebrew Bible and Christian Gospels, and the rest of the semester to modern commentaries and adaptations -e.g. Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Dostoevsky, Kafka, on the one hand, and Frederick Douglass, James Baldwin, Allan Ginsberg, or studies of American civil religion on the other hand. Except for my introductory lecture on the first day, every session began with my 20 minute set up and then two hours of student conversation about the text(s.) After discussion on Tuesday nights, and after reading their weekly response papers on Wednesday morning, I wrote up a 'letter' to comment on their discussion and responses, and to propose a segue to the next week. I have turned these weekly "letters" into this document. The document format may obscure the truly interactive character of the back-and-forth between their discussion/responses and my letters. Also, when collected the letters may seem a bit repetitive because certain themes and arguments were given new layers week by week. Lastly, the commentary and scholarship that students read each week are listed in the syllabus but are not included or linked here, while my own publications, which were excluded from the syllabus, are linked when relevant.

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Syllabus

Required Texts

*The Oxford Study Bible or King James Bible
**Stephen Mitchell, The Book of Job
**Friedrich Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals (Vintage/Penguin)
**Sigmund Freud, Moses and Monotheism
**Norman O. Brown, Love's Body
**James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time
Optional Texts:
**Carl Schmitt, Political Theology and Concept of the Political
**Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Grand Inquisitor (Hackett)
**Franz Kafka, The Metamorphosis and Other Stories ("the Penal Colony")

Orienting Quotes

Nietzsche on Biblical Interpretation:

"The Philology of Christianity - how little Christianity educates the sense of honesty and justice can be gauged fairly well from the character of its scholars' writings: they represent their conjectures as boldly as if they were dogmas and are rarely in any honest perplexity of the interpretation of a passage in the Bible. Again and again they say: "I am right for it is written" - and then follows an interpretation of such impudent arbitrariness that a philologist who hears it is caught between rage and laughter and asks himself: is this possible? Is this honorable? Is it even decent?....How the Bible is pummeled and punched and the art of reading badly is in all due form imparted to the people....But after all, what can one expect from the effects of a religion which in the centuries since its foundation perpetrated that unheard-of philological farce concerning the Old Testament: I mean the attempt to pull the Old Testament from under the feet of the Jews with the assertion that it contained nothing but Christian teachings and belonged to the Christians as the true people of Israel, the Jews being only usurpers. And then there followed a fury of interpretation and construction that cannot possibly be associated with a good conscience: however much Jewish scholars protested, the Old Testament was suppose to speak of Christ and only Christ, and especially his cross. Wherever a piece of wood, a rod, a ladder, a twig, a tree a willow a staff is mentioned, it is supposed to be a prophetic allusion to the wood of the cross...even the spits on which the Passover lamb was roasted -allusions to the Cross and preludes to it. [But] they were conducting a war and paid more heed to their opponents than to the need to stay honest."

Alisdair Macintyre on (the idea of) tradition:

"The connection between narrative and tradition has hitherto gone unnoticed, perhaps because tradition usually has been taken seriously only by conservative social theorists. Yet those features of tradition which emerge as important when the connection between tradition and narrative is understood are ones which conservative theorists are unlikely to attend to. For what constitutes a tradition is a conflict of interpretations of that tradition, a conflict which itself has a history

susceptible to rival interpretations. If I am a Jew, I have to recognize that the tradition of Judaism is partly constituted by a continuous argument over what it means to be a Jew. Suppose I am an American: the tradition is partly constituted by continuous argument over what it means to be an American and partly by continuous argument over what it means to have rejected tradition ... [These] traditions have epistemological debate as a necessary feature of their conflicts. For it is not merely that different participants in a tradition disagree; they also disagree as to how to characterize their disagreement and as to how to resolve them. They disagree as to what constitutes appropriate reasoning, decisive evidence, conclusive proof. A tradition then not only embodies the narrative of an argument, but is only to be recovered by an argumentative retelling of that narrative which will itself be in conflict with other argumentative re-tellings. Every tradition therefore is always in danger of lapsing into incoherence, and when a tradition does so lapse, it sometimes can only be recovered by a revolutionary reconstitution..." from "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science," The Monist 60 (1977)

Hannah Arendt on the idea of truth:

"Kant realized that there can be no absolute truth for man, at least no in the theoretical sense. He would certainly have been prepared to sacrifice truth to the possibility of human freedom; for if we possessed truth we could not be free...Kant argued that an absolute exists, the duty of the categorical imperative which stands above men is decisive in all human affairs and cannot be infringed even for the sake of humanity in every sense of that word...the inhumanity of Kant's moral philosophy is undeniable...because the categorical imperative is postulated as absolute and in its absoluteness introduces into the inter-human realm -which by its nature consists of relationships- something that runs counter to its fundamental relativity...(26-27) Lessing, however, rejoiced in the very thing that has ever...distressed philosophers: that the truth as soon as it is uttered is immediately transformed into one opinion among many, is contested, reformulated, reduced to one subject of discourse among others. Lessing's greatness does not merely consist in a theoretical insight that there cannot be one single truth within the human world, but in his gladness that it does not exist and that, therefore, the unending discourse among men will never cease so long as there are men at all. A single absolute truth, could there have been one, would have been the death of all those disputes...(27)
For Lessing, "truth can exist only where it is humanized by discourse, only when each man says not what just happens to occur to him at the moment, but what he 'deems truth'....such speech...belongs to an area in which there are may voices and where the announcement of what each 'deems truth' both links and separates men, establishing in fact those distances between men which together comprise the world. Every truth outside this area, no matter whether it brings men good or ill, is inhuman in the literal sense of the world, but not because it might rouse men against one another and separate them. Quite the contrary, it is [inhuman] because it might have the result that all men would suddenly unite in a single opinion, so that out of many opinions one would emerge, as though not men in their infinite plurality but man in the singular, one species and its exemplars, were to inhabit the earth."(30-31)

Required Essays

First Paper

Write no more than 5 pages about one passage or story in Genesis. Make a midrash, an interpretation/commentary.

1. Do a close reading of one story in Genesis. (Explore its meanings and ambiguities; consider what is at stake in contrasting interpretations.)

2. Analyze the meaning and purpose of the Eden story as a creation myth. (What aspects of the human condition does it address? By what narrative and literary devices? What are the consequences of its representation of human origins? Do we need origin stories? Why give them authority at all? Which is better?)

3. Reflect on The Bible's statement that God made humans as a self-image. (What is "man" like? what does this tell us about god, man's creator? "Modern" thinkers typically say: "Man makes god his self-image," so also ask, what is god like and what does this tell you about man, his creator?) Why would god or man need to imagine/create an "other"?)Authors seek what in their creations?

4. What is at stake in the Cain-Abel story? (Am I my brother's keeper? Does God ever say? Why does God NOT kill Cain?)

5. Assess the political lesson in stories of familial conflict or rivalry.

6. What human aspirations do the stories of Eden and/or Babel represent and how are we positioned by the stories toward those aspirations? (What do Eve or the builders want? Why deny their aspirations? Could god justify his action in terms we might accept? Is god giving us a gift -by expelling from garden or multiplying languages- even though it is typically called a punishment)

7. Why depict founders as flawed and morally problematic, not idealized? What difference does the representation of founders make?

8. Analyze God's character in Genesis. (What do representations of god say about its authors? About reality or life?)

9. Greeks and Hebrews situate human agency in relation to larger forces they call gods; Machiavelli relates human action to a force he personifies as "Fortuna." Assess such a double perspective on human action. Why create an outside? What difference results from calling it fate, God, or Fortuna?

10. Analyze what the binding of Isaac teaches about god, Abraham, and faith, and by what literary means does it do so? Does god seek self-sacrificing submission? -Or is faith abject only to those lacking it? Is faith antithetical to, or a condition of, freedom? Does faith "suspend" the ethical and allow murder? Do we always live by a faith, but don't acknowledge it? Is faith or its lack the issue -or which faith (and faith in what or who) we live by, make real by enactment (-"We hold these truths self-evident....")

11. How does the text advance a "gendered" representation of women & life? (How does it establish patriarchy? Does it also subvert the authority of men or recast the patriarchal construction of properly masculine & feminine?)

12. What does Genesis teach about "morality"?

Second Paper

Write 5 pages on the ways that Moses, prophets, Job, Jesus, or Paul address a central issue in the tradition they inherit, or model how to relate to traditions we inherit. The issue could be: views of god and what god requires; of god's justice; of idolatry; of membership & identity; of worship & daily (ethical or liturgical) practice, etc.

1. Analyze The Bible's narrative arc. (Why begin with Genesis and humanity rather than the Hebrews in Egypt or Sinai? Why begin again in Egypt rather than Sinai? How does the world of Genesis differ from the world after Sinai? Is this progress?) Why end the Hebrew Bible with Job?

2. Assess how/why God (or views of God) change. What is the text doing?

3. Greeks and Hebrews situate human agency in relation to larger forces they call gods; Machiavelli relates action to a force he personifies as Fortuna. Assess this idea of a double perspective on human action. Why create it? What difference results from calling it god, fate or Fortuna?

4. Rousseau said: "Moses founded the body of a nation, using for his materials a swarm of wretched fugitives who possessed no skills, no arms, no talents, no virtues, no courage, and who, without an inch of territory to call their own, were truly a troupe of outcasts on the face of the earth. Moses made bold to transform this herd of servile emigrants into a political society, a free people." Critically assess the idea of "making" a free people.

5. Analyze Exodus as a model of revolutionary politics. Does it offer crucial lessons? send radicals in the wrong direction? How would Moses respond to you?

6. Explore different interpretations of the psychological/familial relation between god and the Hebrews.(Will the Hebrews "grow up" only when they learn to "fear god," or, will they never "grow up" as long as they "fear god"? But also, if "god" is a metaphor what does "fear god" mean? Likewise, what does "loving" god mean? (don't forget Jesus: the meaning of the 10 commandments is "love god" and "love your neighbor as yourself.")

7. How does the text advance a "gendered" representation of women & life? (Is this a problem? Does it also subvert the authority of men or recast the patriarchal construction of properly masculine & feminine?)

8. Analyze idolatry. Why must there be one abstract/invisible god? What does it mean to call other gods “idols?” Why worship Yahweh rather than a golden calf? The Greeks were polytheist: what differences follow?

9. Explore the violent insistence on cultural difference that was imposed backward in time after Babylonian exile. Why refuse mixing, intermarriage, and cosmopolitanism? Why attack the actual hybridity of cultures and enforce cultural purity?

10. “All the achievements of civilization are bathed in blood - that is the critical and horrific -the tragic- lesson of the Bible.” discuss

11. “The promise of redemption justifies violence, and entails the dangerous fantasy of a promised land as a recovered Eden. Political wisdom and democratic freedoms require us to reject such promises!” discuss

12. What does The Bible (Genesis to Deuteronomy) teach about “morality”? (If violence is needed to found the law prohibiting violence, does the text teach ethical idealism or its impossibility?)

13. A.nonymous: "Subjection to authority never yields freedom."

    B.nonymous: "To orient ourselves by the right kind of authority is the only way to foster our freedom.

    ”C.nonymous: "But what kind of authority is that?"

    Use Biblical texts to assess the relationship of authority & freedom: do some kinds of authority produce subjection and others enable freedom? Or does the text inextricably connect subjection to forming a “subject” responsible for its acts?

14. "God is a tyrant! For a people denied freedom of choice, there is no difference between slavery in Egypt and 'serving' God."-A.nonymous

    "God seeks freedom by teaching Hebrews to make and keep covenants. But freedom also depends on what they promise: they are free only if they choose to do certain things and reject others." -B.nonymous.

    Relate the Hebrew god, covenant, and freedom.

15. “Freedom lies in making and keeping promises because promises embody both self-determination and self-limitation. Acts of commitment -choosing to live by a law, with a lover, for a principle- demonstrate our freedom. ‘Freedom from’ is slave-talk.” Analyze this claim.

16. “For Abraham or Moses, freedom means breaking tradition: we become free by rejecting the tradition/authorities we had internalized and initiating the unprecedented.” -A.nonymous
    “No, they teach piety and memory: freedom means renewing (making a-new) an inherited frame of first principles. A ‘free’ people reaffirm (by re-making) inherited commitments as their own, now.”-B.nonymous

    Analyze the relationship between tradition and freedom

17. Moses seeks remembrance-of what? Why are memory and forgetting so crucial in politics?

18. Assess the idea of collective liability: are you responsible for what is done in your name? Are we responsible for acts by others in our community? Is it just that no one is exempted from collective responsibility e.g. for slavery, endemic racism, concentration camps, imperial wars, Guantanamo?

19. “The Bible shows that monotheism is necessarily dogmatic and anti-democratic because it stipulates ONE transcendent authority and moral law, to mandate ONE right way to live. Biblical conceptions of law and authority devalue plurality, and foster violence rather than freedom.”-A.nonymous

    “The Bible offers crucial resources to small d democrats: the idea of covenant, the model of prophetic witness, the praise for memory and historical attachment, the insight into human finitude and fallibility, and the chastening of moral pretension.” -B.nonymous

    Assess the political bearing of The Bible: what kind of disposition or ethos does it (has it, can it, might it?) foster?

20. “Taken as a whole, The Bible teaches irony, a self-critical attitude even toward the forms of authority and piety it endorses.” Does the text enable alienation not myth, iconoclasm not orthodoxy, discontent not subjection?

21. "The prophets, claiming to speak god's word, are self-righteous and intolerant, guilt-tripping and moralistic. What gives them authority to judge anyone?" -A.nonymous

    “Hebrews are held accountable to their own professed standards, to a 'god' whose authority enables them to make judgments about justice by requiring them to think about what “our” god requires.” -B.nonymous

    Assess authority/judgment prophets, including Jesus, Douglass, MLK

22. How does Jesus reject (or revise) the tradition he inherits? (Which elements does he use to reject what other elements? Does he initiate unprecedented changes?)

23. Evaluate the idea of internalizing the law (Moses says circumcising the heart.)

24. Prophets hold each Hebrew responsible for a collective fate from which none are exempted, while Jesus teaches individual responsibility for sin and salvation. (Machiavelli thus condemns Christianity on political grounds, on devaluing actual, worldly life) Assess the contrast

25. “Jesus individualizes a freedom he construes as only internal. For Moses, earlier prophets, the Greeks & Machiavelli, only slaves think this way." Discuss

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28. Analyze the idea of redemption in Matthew. (What does it mean to seek “the kingdom of god?” Is this a worldly practice? An escape to the interior? A fantasized “true world” by which to devalue the actual one? How does it compare with Exodus redemption, or prophetic repentance?)

29. “The whole point of the Bible is to establish and justify a moral law (and constitutional framework) for the Hebrews.” -A.nonymous

    “On the contrary, The Bible teaches profound ambivalence about ‘the law’ and what people call ‘morality’” -B.nonymous

    Is there a lesson about “morality” in the Bible?

30. What does The Book of Job teach about god’s justice in relation to humanly -made (“moral”) categories of good and evil? How does the story position humans toward that god and their own categories, and with what effect?

31. “The book of Job shatters the idea that the law known to human beings reflects the law rooted in the divine or ultimate nature of being, and the idea that the divine or ultimate nature of being is in essence law-like.” Assess this claim and its implications for the conduct of human life.

32. If Job is innocent, why does he suffer and what is its meaning? (How does the text teach us to understand suffering? How does it address claims that the universe -and suffering- is ethically rational or intelligible?)

33. Relate the style or form of The Book of Job to its content: does the poetry gesture beyond the discursive and argumentative? How? Why?

34. “Job is a tragic text.” In what sense of tragedy and the tragic is this a true, or useful, or limited, or wildly incorrect, statement?

35. Compare The Gospel of Matthew to The Book of Job.

Third Paper

1. Compare how Nietzsche and Marx criticize and yet draw on biblical/religious traditions and idioms.

2. Analyze Nietzsche’s effort to relate suffering, resentment -and creativity. Assess his claim that these have been the “womb” and “workshop” of our ideals and assess his alternative.

3. Analyze Nietzsche’s account of the “slave revolt” in morality, both his view of the problem it poses, and his response. (Why not celebrate when the weak hold the strong to account? Is he right that those who value equality only seek sameness, and thereby seek security, comfort, an end to solitude, avoidance of risk, and disavowal of difference?)

4. “It is no surprise that the weak formulate ideas of justice. The true miracle occurs when the strong acknowledge the legitimacy of the claim; then politics can begin.” -A.nonymous

   “Justice promoted by inferiors is an inferior sort of justice, poisoned by envy or rancor, and if the strong succumb to its claims out of pity, the possibility of healthy politics is lost.” -B.nonymous

   Discuss N’s conception of justice and its implications.

5. A.nonymous: “N’s whole endeavor aimed to free life from the dead weight of the ‘bad conscience’ because guilt and indebtedness can found only a corrupt and enfeebled society.”

   B.nonymous: “N thoroughly misunderstood guilt and indebtedness because human responsibility and mutuality presuppose a capacity for guilt, and community presupposes the recognition of debts to others, whether dead, living or not yet born.”

   Discuss.

6. For Nietzsche, the cause and meaning (or interpretation) of suffering is central to Christianity, democracy, the ascetic ideal, science, and to his own vision of "overcoming." Assess his argument about suffering, and its political implications for those committed to democracy.

7. Analyze Nietzsche’s argument about “the death of god” (what does this mean?) as well as the ways we seek “theistic substitutes” (in reason and nationalism) rather than mourn that

loss. What might follow from accepting both that “god” is dead and that we have killed him?

8. "Nihilism originates in the assumption that no belief, value or morality warrants authority unless it is universal, absolute, unconditional. By exposing how motives and perspective make any authority all-too-human, Nietzsche is not endorsing nihilism or relativism, but rather, making us capable again of commitment." Analyze N on nihilism & its overcoming.

9. Explore the paradoxes and purpose of Nietzsche's critique of “the will to truth.” Does he escape it by celebrating art, that is, fiction and appearances? When Wallace Stevens says human beings live by “supreme fictions” does he describe Nietzsche’s goal: to live by truths we “hold” as such and endow with value? Is his goal new gods and myths, recognized as supreme fictions? (Use the preface to Gay Science & Zarathustra)

10. Nietzsche criticizes "ascetic priests," but is he one, offering truths that give purpose to suffering and meaning to existence? Or does he exercise authority differently?

11. From Exodus to Paul, redemption has been a key trope and desire in biblical traditions. How does Nietzsche criticize and yet rework inherited ideas of redemption? How does he conceive redemption -FROM What, and, OF what?

12. What do you understand now by the idea of “faith” in political life?

13. Political theology studies how “religious” ideas constitute political life -conceptions of authority or idolatry; of covenant, law, and rule; of exception and miracle; of faith as a leap into the absurd or as a dogmatic condition of action; of history as teleologically driven toward its “end;” of morality and its internalization; etc. Take one of these ideas from “theology” and explore its (secularized or translated) political implications.

14. Since we read Laclau and Blake on the meaning of God, we have tracked a tension between arguments on behalf of acknowledging finitude or human limitation, and arguments defending the idea of incarnation, that human beings can indeed embody the divine. Explore what is at stake in this contrast.

15. What is the meaning of ‘the sacred’ or ‘divine’ as applied to or in political life? How does it appear, in whom or what institution, and how should we relate to it?

16. Norman O. Brown overcomes the asceticism of Christianity by embedding symbolism in bodies and senses, but he retains the dream of uniting humanity (the dream of universality) that also animated Marx and democratic politics at its best. Taking from Nietzsche the redemption of both the ‘animal in man’ and ‘the artist in man’ Brown depicts the redemption from the death-in-life of a civilization invested in fetishes of autonomy. Assess Brown’s project.

17. Assess how Baldwin interprets white supremacy as political theology, and proposes (indeed, performs) a counter-theology.

18. “The Inquisitor is right: we human beings are slaves, but rebellious by nature. Since we refuse the responsibility of freedom, we seek authority to submit to; we may rebel against it, but can’t relinquish it.” Discuss

19. Dostoevksy’s grand inquisitor perfectly embodies Nietzsche’s “ascetic priest,” who tends to “the herd” through “miracle, mystery, and authority,” as well as though ideas of sin and orgies of feeling. But if Nietzsche and Dostoevksy both reject the ascetic priest, in what does their difference consist?

20. Dostoevsky’s “Grand Inquisitor” is a parable, and it seems to contrast two forms of authority by contrasting the priest and jesus. What does this contrast consist in & what is at stake in it? (If D contrasts “happiness” and “freedom,” does he depict these in a falsely polarized way?) But also, what is the meaning of Jesus kissing the old man at the end? What does the kiss signify?

21. “So it keeps writing deeper and deeper for the whole twelve hours. The first six ours the condemned man...suffers only pain...But how quite he grows at just about the sixth hour...Enlightenment comes even to the most dull-witted....You have seen how difficult it is to decipher the script with one’s eyes, but our man deciphers it with his wounds.” Discuss authority, law, punishment, and redemption in Kafka’s story of modernity -in light of Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals.

22. Are those in Anglo-European civilization now in the role of Kafka’s explorer? How do we conceive the issue of judgment without the illusion of an absolute standard? Should he have intervened? What is Kafka dramatizing?

Précis

These comments extensively elaborate my introductory and concluding 'lectures' about the course themes. It is for colleagues seeking a summary.

This course explores the idea of "political theology" by considering how modern thinkers (and actors) conceive the political implications of biblical texts. Strictly speaking, if "theology" is the effort to produce (rational) knowledge of god, then "political theology" suggests the idea that political power or the state should be anchored in (our knowledge of) divine law, as if god is a ruler whose will and law should legitimate and regulate the regimes that human beings make. More broadly, however, "political theology" suggests: (a) that every regime is anchored in faith -whether faith in god or atheism, or in rule by reason, or in equality and universal human rights- and (b) that every "faith" has a worldly bearing on the collective life we make. In this broad sense, political theology is the study of how faith shapes politics. In this regard (c) it is readily apparent that even if we declare a faith, its meaning is not self-evident, but requires interpretation, and as a result, people who profess faith in the same god (or scripture, or principle) practice it differently. This is as true of those who call themselves Jews, Christians, or Muslims, as of people who call themselves democratic. In turn, (d) the implication of these premises is that a 'theology' or faith (e.g. in god or reason or democracy -or white supremacy) can be met only by an alter-faith or counter-theology. My version of "political theology" thus includes study of how we conceive but also practice our faiths, how faiths are instantiated in various and divergent "forms of life," and how we imagine and address plurality and conflict. By emphasizing faith, I would displace approaches that equate theology with philosophy and politics with sovereignty; by instead foregrounding the contingent political actions, powerful characters, and formative metaphors in the biblical texts, I would emphasize both the poetic imagination and the creative action they put at the center of politics. By linking theology to faith (not philosophy) and by linking faith not to creed but to poetic vision and political practice, I would rethink the 'political' in political theology.

Our goal, then, is to explore the relationship between faith and (forms of) life, by focusing especially on the bonds relating faith to politics in the Jewish and Christian traditions. It is important to emphasize that this approach cannot privilege orthodox versions of scriptural interpretation, but includes them among other kinds of interpretation. Likewise, this approach does not take as a given the liberalism that privatized religion as a matter of individual creed and conscience, for in the biblical worlds, and in the text, there is no privileged "private' realm, and no sense of a creed abstracted from social practice -which gives us a chance to gain critical distance from the assumptions of liberalism.

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To explore this approach to political theology, we will:

1) Consider what might be called the tragic and the existentialist elements in the Hebrew Bible and in the example of Jesus, reading against the grain of the priestly strands that inscribe a didacticism in the text and a providential purpose in life.

2) Think about the ways in which Biblical texts are enigmatic, ironical, and ambiguous, not only didactic. We will draw on William Blake's "infernal" reading of the Bible, to side with the

snake and Eve, and we will draw on Adam Phillips' idea that "truancy" is inescapable and valuable in any of our relations with authority. Whereas dominant readings of the Bible and Gospels assume a posture of compliance OR defiance, e.g. reverence for a just god OR defiance of an unjust god, we will treat "god" both as an effort to name an essentially enigmatic and overwhelming reality, and as a changing character in the text. We will consider how the biblical texts teach us to see the necessity of acknowledging the awe-ful excess of reality beyond our comprehension and so also the human finitude we continually disavow. We will consider how the text prompts acknowledgment both of the necessity of authority and of the necessity of resistance - what I call a tragic or "truant" viewpoint. Even when god seems most dogmatic -at Sinai, against the golden calf- we will trace how the text leaves us with unresolvable dilemmas about human choice and suffering, covenant and justice, leadership and social change.

3) Going beyond specific textual readings, we will consider the Hebrew Bible and Christian gospels -and 'religion' more broadly- as examples of *human poesis* by which human beings engage in collective self-fashioning through the narratives, fictions, myths, and faiths they invent, or inherit and revise. In the view I defend, "we hold these truths to be self-evident" is not only the specific basis of a democratic society, but the speech-act we can see at work in every dominant narrative and cultural or religious tradition. I propose that faith (and 'acts of faith') are ubiquitous, so that we may feel we are outside of faith altogether, but that is only because we have not yet identified the faith (the presumptions, the framework) we remain within. I am associating faith with what Wittgenstein calls a passionate frame of reference, itself not empirically validated but rather itself the condition of what we consider true and false. I am associating faith with truths we take as self-evident, and live by, that is, make real by our enactment. I am therefore associating faith not simply with a "creed" as a personal or even shared idea, but with the practices and dispositions by which people materialize and embody it -and the same creed can be embodied in quite divergent ways. I see forms of faith enacted (and tested) by any relationship, collectivity or institution, and inseparably tied to forms of power.

4) When I say "political theology," I am invoking a sense of "politics" that may be very different from what you were taught. Imagine politics not simply as 'government" but rather as naming what we would call "collective self-fashioning" -i.e. how people form and shape themselves -and are formed and shaped- into collective subjects (communities, groups, tribes, peoples, city-states, nations, empires churches) and thereby take shape as individuals. Imagine politics as the exercise of power, as rule-making in every domain of life, and so as ruling over, but also imagine politics as refusal and as rule-remaking. Imagine politics as contests over power and rules (over who rules and how, over who rules and by what norms or values, as contests involving both power and legitimacy). Imagine politics as contests over how we conceive, rank, and practice values. Imagine politics as contests over our central constitutive practices - how we labor, reproduce ourselves (not only biologically but by way of culture as cultivation). Imagine politics as contests over the meanings we make and live by. Imagine politics as constantly contesting and redefining that 'we.' As action in concert, claim-making, and the exercise of power, 'politics' at once instantiates and disrupts a community or institution.

I am linking 'political' and 'theology' through the idea that we live by/out faiths, and I am reading faith less as 'doctrine' and more as 'poesis' (as the organizing fictions, narratives and metaphors by which people imagine, name, and shape the world -and themselves.) I am linking

politics to faith and both to narrative. The fundamental political act is "framing" circumstances and history by narrative story-telling, and by artful speech and powerful examples, people are interpellated by leaders and poets into that faith or narrative frame, so that they say -we are those who hold….Narratives frame every controversy, precede all 'pragmatic' action. Narratives are both the site and medium of politics in its more conventional senses.

We examine the Hebrew Bible, then, as political theology/theory because it performs poesis -it imagines and names life, depicts and shapes a world- in ways that raise fundamental political questions - In what institutions, ideas, or people do we lodge authority? With whom do we identify and on what basis? If we start thinking about politics by asking about authority, and by asking about identification, we can then assess how or if such attachments, orientations and investments enable us to flourish -and at whose expense. We can ask whether we might imagine authority and identification -and so membership- differently, and practice them otherwise.

By this agonistic view, "politics" is inescapable because human life is characterized by: 1) human incompletion, heterogeneity, and social interdependence; 2) the inescapability of ambiguity, interpretation, and disagreement; 3) the inevitability of contingency.
But,
human beings recurrently seek to escape political life, as if it were escapable:

We seek an absolute truth (or standard of justice) to settle conflicts about reality and justice, as if to overcome the plurality of views about the world and about how to name and judge our conduct in it. Rather than seek the truth IN each view to foster mutual understanding across differences and adversaries, we seek a transcendent position ABOVE them. That position can be derived from philosophy (by way of rationality and logic) or from revelation (by god's word, the one right way to live, the one word, embodied in scripture). The dream is that we could -by logic or revelation- compel people to agree to the same governing truth. If we could get agreement on one transcendent truth -if we could get everyone to internalize the same transcendent law- then they replace plurality and conflict (as if a disease) with harmony. We seek an authority ostensibly more stable than our own ("merely human") agreements or understandings.

We imagine authorities who can tend to the common good for us (priestly types, experts, philosophers, scientists) -people freed from our narrowness of interest and perspective, capable of seeing and serving the greater good apart from their own interests. We put our power, lives and fate in their hands because of their knowledge and their virtue.

We dream of rational social planning, to overcome partisanship and chance, or, we dream of complete virtue in members of a community, as if whole-hearted devotion to the common good would create harmony and overcome conflict. We imagine a democratic "utopia," an "eden" or "promised land" characterized by widespread even universal virtue, cooperation, harmony.

We dream of a language whose transparency and simplicity enables us to overcome the uncertainty and ambiguity entailed by speech and dialogue, themselves the fruit of plurality. We imagine one language uniting us all.

We rely on tyranny or police -on violence.

I think that political theorists make a mistake by locating the idea of the political and the invention of the democratic only with Athens, with the polis, in contrast to the theocratic and

scriptural, identified with Jerusalem. Correspondingly, Athens is typically identified with reason and philosophy, and contrasted with faith, revelation, and theocratic authoritarianism, associated with Jerusalem. I read the Bible in ways that refuse these dichotomies. I read the Hebrew Bible not as a political theory "of" democracy as such, but as a theory/theology dramatizing constitutive features of political life, and thereby offering powerful resources and resonances for thinking about democracy. The original historical confederacy of Hebrew tribes, before kings, was a kind of democratic political organization, and the biblical tradition of ambivalence about monarchy and idolatry -from Moses through prophecy- bespeaks that origin and history. At the core of the 'democratic theory' I would draw from the Hebrew Bible (and Jesus as a Hebrew) is:

(a) the idea of covenant -of living by promises;

(b) the understanding not of 'justice' as a noun to specify or validate philosophically, but of 'doing justly,' which makes justice a verb, a practice of interdependence and responsibility that creates a bond of love, a commitment to mutuality, a focus on consequences, and a practice of taking 'joint liability' for the fate of the whole.

By covenants as promises- and a life conceived through promise-making- freedom is linked to justice, choice and action to both individual and collective forms of responsibility. In turn, the idea of organizing a community by covenant entails thinking about how to sustain or renew a promise (to live by certain principles and practices) over time, across generations. How does a community keep an inherited covenant (made by 'founders') from becoming reified, routinized, formulaic, hollowed-out over time? This 'second generation' problem is crucial in Moses' speech in Deuteronomy, in prophecy, in Jesus, and in important American narratives and conflicts. But also, what does it mean to posit the necessity of a 'new' covenant -to imagine a different vision of justice and community- as most prophets do? What is the radicalism in this?

c) In addition to the idea of covenant and the idea that justice is a verb, a third biblical idea seems crucial to thinking democratic life--the idea, via Moses, of a community in which every person is capable of being a prophet, an idea that runs through radical Protestantism to Blake and then into the Emersonian tradition in the US. Every person bears that prophetic capacity because every person is called to and can (in principle) hear/channel 'the voice of god' (Blake calls it both our 'poetic genius' and 'the voice of honest indignation' -our imaginative capacity and our sense of justice) - and because every person is called to and can (in principle) bear witness to suffering, name its causes, and poeticize its meaning.

But lastly,
(d) I would propose that the Bible is a great "political theory" text for thinking democratic life, because it dramatizes the problem of freedom in its many dimensions. It dramatizes the tensions we see in Dostoevsky's 'Grand Inquisitor' parable, between human aspirations for freedom and our wish to be taken care of, between our longing for autonomy and our longing for dependence, between our demand for and disavowal of responsibility. Such tensions are constitutive, from stories about hating slavery but then wanting to go back to it, about making but betraying covenants, about taking on joint liability to create a community without kings and yet wanting a personification or idol -from the golden calf to a king- to represent and act for them. Over and over, the text asks: do human beings really want freedom? (They are rebellious sheep, the Grand

Inquisitor says; they resent authority, but still want to be told by authority what is good & evil, what to believe and value, how to act.) The arc of the Bible also dramatizes the (Machiavellian) question of what it means to 'make' a 'free people' - as if to say freedom is not only an innate capacity we honor or betray, but a social and historical achievement that is made possible by encouraging certain practices and discouraging others. God says he wants a community based on freely offered worship and freely made covenants, but you see god's use of carrots and sticks, especially (the threat of) punishment. In what way is the text thereby showing us the paradox of politics, whereby the people cannot be before the law what they can become only by way of the law? And the text is constantly asking: can people change, or act differently? can they enact the 'turning' that is translated as repentance and that allows us to begin again? The text dramatizes so many dimensions of freedom by its stories: think of Eve testing the limits of the garden, Cain murdering Abel and compelled by god to begin a new life, Abraham leaving Ur and the god of his fathers, Moses raised in privilege but shifting his identification, Jesus declaring it is written but I say unto you, and so on. The texts demonstrate our capacity to create, to initiate the unprecedented, to live differently, to undertake chosen sacrifice, a capacity to act and choose that is sometimes in recession, or not visible to us, but always available to draw on, if we recover our faith in it, and face our ambivalence about it. That is part of the story, from Abraham to Moses and prophets to Jesus. Freedom thus means not only taking responsibility by making and keeping covenants, but also by creative action and initiative that disrupts and remakes those covenants. This capacity is engendered and actualized through our bonds with others, and as the capacity to act and create can be forgotten or disavowed, so those bonds can be eviscerated or disavowed.

(e) Of course, the Bible's depictions of a sovereign god and an exclusive and 'chosen' community have forever been used to secure authority, demonize cultural difference, and justify violence -to escape from politics by tyranny, ideological domination, and police. As it was taken up to create Christian, American nationalist, Zionist and Islamic "fundamentalist" forms of 'politial theology,' it seems inseparably connected to crusades and inquisitions, imperialism and slavery, European colonialism and settler colonialisms. Its strands and redactions, the assembly of both the Hebrew and the Christian texts, not only need to be situated in power struggles between different social groups with conflicting agendas, but also need to be seen as renewable rhetorical resources in ongoing struggles to justify social and psychological control of human thought and action. At the same time, the English and American revolutions are inconceivable without the exodus framework; the american founders at first imagined the national seal displaying the crossing of the Jordan River -even as this framework was also used to justify genocidal dispossession and slavery. In turn, from its inception, abolitionist struggle against slavery, and more broadly against white supremacy, including the modern civil rights movement, is inconceivable without the imaginative tropes and narrative that insurgents drew from biblical texts. We will therefore draw out the ways that white supremacy has been the governing political theology in the United States, but also consider the counter-theologies forged by those seeking abolition democracy.

(f) Fundamentally, then, the most basic issue in the class -from your first encounter witdh the Eden story- concerns the question of "reading." At one level you will need to ask, does the text really or definitively "answer" the questions about authority, or identification, or freedom that I see it raising? I would say, no more or less than Plato's Republic "answers" the question of justice! Sure, there are textual grounds for normative or orthodox readings of the text, which see

it offering truth and morality in a didactic way. But that reading is constantly undercut or complicated, if we read carefully. So, you can read it in the orthodox way, but you also can read it otherwise. You can see the passages and images that can be used to justify domination or exclusion, but you can also find the passages that can be used to refuse violence. You will also need to make a judgment about the impact of the narrative arc and key tropes as they are taken up subsequently. You may decide that the text (and the three religions it has enabled) is so linked to authoritarian and punitive features in cultures around the world that we must reject the whole tradition, be rid of it. You may say, as Edward Said argued, that a text based on monotheism necessarily produces only monologue and violence. You may find yourself drawn to King's readings. Or, like Blake and many others, you may use an 'infernal reading' (against what he called the 'priestly' grain of orthodoxy and its literalism) to draw out its subversive and democratic resources. In turn, how you read these texts will tell you about yourself, because our readings inescapably manifest how you 'read' and engage the world beyond the text. Do you read for contradiction and ambiguity? Do you allow yourself to be seduced by a text, undone, opened up, only later recovering or achieving critical distance? I hope we will make steps in learning to begin with humility rather than arrogance about one's preconceptions, to put one's assumptions and identity at risk, to surrender -at least at first- to the experience a text creates. I think that is the only path to real learning -by surrender and risk. Consider the contradictions in the text not as a fault (the mote in its eye, while a plank is in your own) but as illustrative or instructive -ask, what is going on here, what is the author struggling with, trying to dramatize, what problems and questions is the text raising, addressing, or answering? Are they our problems and questions, too? Ask, too, what questions or issues are being avoided or covered over or falsely resolved? In what ways does the text "answer" the questions it asks or raises? Does it complicate its answer? Suggest there is no solution? Show the necessity of the question but the plurality and contingency of how it can be answered? Imagine your relationship to the text, your way of reading, as a mirror of your relationship to life, your way of living. To consider how to read is to always to consider how to live, and each is, at once, a personal and political question.

Introduction: Poetry and Politics in Blake

Readings

Friedman, Who Wrote the Bible?
William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven & Hell"
Ernesto Laclau, "The Name of God"
Genesis 1-6

Blake: Partly, he is asking: what is the relationship between poetry and what is now called "religion" -i.e. is our imagination of god and/or the cosmos in fact "poetic," based in metaphor, not at bottom about doctrine? (Is God a poetic fiction? Must we imagine "gods" to imagine ourselves?) He wonders: how did prophets imagine "god" talking to them -are they crazy, or is something else going on? IN sum, how are we to interpret "scripture"? What are the implications of the idea that we should read scripture as POETRY? Partly, he is raising a series of questions about law, morality and power. Does "the law" (i.e. the moral law written by priests and the positive law written by other elites) in fact serve the hegemony of a ruling class? Is there a difference between what priests CALL "god" and CALL THE moral law, and morality rightly understood? For (a) Jesus said the truth of the law is to love and forgive, and what does this suggest? And (b) can moral conduct be coerced or achieved by prohibition? Do prohibition or punishment always fail? Partly, he asks: does the bible actually but covertly take sides with "the devil's party," i.e. with the serpent, knowledge, desire, growth? Is the text properly read ironically not literally? Does it in fact subvert what it seems to teach?
Laclau: he unfolds a rigorous and logical argument that explores what it means to say that it is impossible to truly or fully represent god (the absolute, transcendent, the big Other, the Real) in language, i.e. in any name or adjective. Ask yourself: is this claim right? Also ask yourself - what are the implications of defining ourselves by lack or incompletion, by finitude? How do people act, and with what results, if they <u>accept</u>, or if they <u>deny</u>, this condition of finitude?

Discussion Questions

General:

The first really broad and central question to ask is: how should we read -interpret and translate- this text called The Bible? Read it literally as scripture, divinely inspired? Read figuratively, ironically, poetically? Consider how the text has layers of (contradictory) meanings, not one self-evident "message." What happens if you read it like a poem, not a catechism; if you read as a poet, not a priest?

The second really broad and central question to ask is: should we follow Blake to understand "god" as a figure (metaphor) of plenitude, suggesting the abundance of life (of Being) and the multitude of ways or forms or particular beings in which it manifests? How would we humans then imagine ourselves or politics if this was our fundamental assumption? Or, should we follow Laclau, and imagine human life as FINITE, never capable of grasping the absolute, never grasping the infinity in a grain of sand, never fully present to itself, never at-one-with-being, always incomplete, always lacking. How then would we imagine ourselves and our politics?

For Genesis:

Watch your view of God: you will see God as irrational, arbitrary, violent, impulsive. Not omnipotent or omniscient. This is not a christian or platonized god, impersonal, rational, eternal, stable. Nor is this is the Mosaic god who establishes “moral law.” You are likely to feel that this god is a nightmarish figure, a horrible and tyrannical parent, authority at its worst. So Genesis is in many senses about authority, and about god’s authority, and about the authority of fathers ----in relation to human autonomy.

Ask, therefore:
1. If god is a poetic fiction, what is being represented by “god” as a character or reality?
2. If human autonomy is conceived in relation to the gods and fates in the Greek world, how is it conceived in the Hebrew world? (How is “god” a way to frame the meaning and limits of human autonomy?)
3. What do you “expect” of god —and of authority more generally? Are you trying to turn god into a perfect bureaucrat -absolutely impartial and impersonal? What distinguishes a “good” from a “bad” god -or parent or teacher? What are your criteria?
4. How does Blake model a way to read/interpret The Bible?
5. Give a “blakean” reading of one passage or story
6. Compare Blake and Laclau on the idea of god

Letter One: Reading Blake to theorize god and poetry, scripture and religion:

1. Blake says:
(a) "he who sees the infinite in all things, sees god."
(b) "god becomes as we are, that we may be as he is"
(c) "the jewish and christian testaments are an original derivation from the poetic genius...All religions have one source. The true man is the source, he being the poetic genius."
(d) "Some will say: is not god alone prolific? I answer: god only Acts and Is in existing beings or men." For **Blake**, then, god is energy and action: I am that I am; I will be what I will be. But God is also form-giving, giving shape to energy from inside-out: “reason is the circumference of desire.” god is in us as poetic genius, the creative source within each creature. God becomes as we are so that we may become as god is. God is at once incarnation and self-expression. We are (like) god most of all in our poetic genius, our capacity to create and act, to author.

2. We need poetry to figure-forth, to imagine and represent this energy which is in all things. So poets imagine “gods” - and we are formed by the gods we imagine. So Wallace Stevens says we need to create “supreme fictions” by which to live -call them myths - so that the life we actually lead is shaped by the art we make. But we forget that we are poets; we reify metaphors into “Truths” (with a big T.) Blake thus says we are trapped in “mind-forged manacles.”

3. Thus, bibles or "sacred codes" propagate profound errors: (a) we make a dichotomy between body and soul, whereas in truth, "man has no body distinct from his soul, for that called body is a portion of soul discerned by the five senses ...Energy is the only life." (b) we live by dichotomies rather than "contraries"- i.e. as if there is an absolute difference between good and evil, either-or, rather than a relationship -we need the serpent, indeed, Blake would have us join “the devil’s party.” (c) we invent the idea of THE ONE moral law, a THOU SHALT NOT (a law of

prohibition and punishment) anchored in the dichotomy of good vs. evil. So Blake says: "I tell you, no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments." He questions both dichotomy and law to re-imagine what morality means.

4. Priests turn poetic genius into formula, laws, codes that they impose on the rest of us. They turn metaphor into TRUTH. They fossilize the poetry created by poetic genius or god within us. They create "religion," which reifies into a thing what poetry had put forth in sound and image. Poets create images, priests create laws, and we internalize those laws. We need to recover the poesis -the capacity to create- that he calls poetic genius. Priests give it to god only, and they call sin our energy and desire to create. Indeed they link the devil to this very energy, our creativity.

5. What we call moral law is ideology: "The gospel is forgiveness of sins and has no moral precepts," i.e. "Love" as the golden rule is not about a "law" to apply but about a disposition towards others. To make law is to install prohibition and punishment: "When Satan first the black bow bent/And the Moral Law from the Gospel rent/He forged the Law into a Sword/And spilled the blood of mercy's law." Moral law, originating in Moses' Thou Shalt Not, means prohibition, guilt, fear and punishment. That is partly because morality enshrines abstract dichotomies and purifying negations that Blake rejects in favor of "contraries," which recognize the evil in good and the good in evil. But also, moral law serves hegemony: moral law is THEIR law, the law of the state and the priests, the powerful and respectable. What the middle class CALLS morality Blake depicts as a limited horizon of norms defining the blasphemous, seditious, insane. So morality is an invention he links to elites, property, prisons, linked to the fear of sex (so prostitution the other side of morality) linked to the policing of people. We internalize these rules and police ourselves, fearing our sexuality, desire, creativity. In a phrase later used by Aldous Huxley, Blake describes "the doors of perception" closed up, for "man has closed himself up, til he sees all things through the narrow chinks of his cavern."

6. Blake rejects what is called morality to transform what morality means. For he believes in the golden rule, in treating people as ends not means, and on these grounds he objects to a world organized by force and exploitation, by state power -power exercised always in the name of defending civilization against the barbaric. Reciprocal relations of acknowledgment between us -"love"- cannot be generated by law but only transforming hearts and minds. While a person who is 'good' in conventional moral terms will try to obey an external god and law, to gain heavenly reward or avoid worldly punishment, just as Plato describes- the task is bringing out the capacity for goodness, the desire. Organized morality has some good in it - to harm let alone kill others IS wicked- but it seeks to prevent or inhibit (to prohibit or control) "sinful" desire -and will fail at this- rather than encourage or foster the god within each -our capacities for loving others. He affirms moral judgment -"honest indignation the voice of god" he says; indeed, his says forgiveness presumes "severity of judgment" as a first step, but for the sake of "bringing out" the god within, not punishing sin.' So, by speaking of love, Blake rejects the language of self-interest to conceive motivation and action. Political action may begin with self-interest and enlarge it, as Aristotle and Tocqueville argue, but Blake seeks a deeper transformation in the character of desire and its objects. Like the early Marx, he sees self- interest as a self-defeating basis of democratic relations. Democracy require people whose perception and action is not trapped in "the mind-forged manacles" of the subject-object duality, who instead see their creative constitution of the world by vision, the implication of each in the other, and the efficacy

of eliciting desire rather than enforcing norms. Blake here voices a cultural politics, for only by erotic energy can people enact rather than betray the moral aspirations underwriting democratic relations. Those who advocate this transformation from will to desire and from law to love -advocates like Jesus, Allan Ginsberg and Norman O. Brown, or Arendt and Foucault- will belong to what Blake ironically calls "the devil's party," because their challenge to moral law is perceived as and called "evil." ---

In "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," therefore, the "angels" are the priests and the "devils" are the voices that Blake endorses. So the "angel" who defends the 10 commandments in the end becomes a devil, and Blake says of him that "we often read the Bible together in its infernal or diabolical sense..." To read the text in its "diabolical" sense is to stay connected to the poetic genius or god within! And so to destroy rather than erect orthodoxy.

Genesis

Readings

Auerbach, from Mimesis
Stanley Fish, from Self-Consuming Artifacts
Adam Phillips, “On Difficult Children”
William Adams, “political poetics”
Genesis 11-41

Discussion Questions

Use Auberbach or Fish (or Wm Adams on narrative, or Blake on bible as poetry) to think about the narrative arc of Genesis.

Auerbach: What kind of character does the text present compared to the characters presented by Homer? What kind of subjectivity does the text foster in readers? by what literary art does the text create a sense of enigma, depth, complexity, and open a space for interpretation.
Fish: Is it a “rhetorical” or “dialectical” text -is it a ‘good physician or a bad one?
Adams: depicts “political poetics” through the “narrative construction of reality.” For Adams, all politics is framed by narratives, which frame temporality (history as well as memory), which dramatize what objects and goals to desire, what virtues to imitate, which thus engender a sense of identity as well as ‘imagined community.’ Consider how these stories of creation and then of Eden, do this. Consider the difference between a text that begins “once upon a time” and a text that says “in the beginning…”

To pursue these broad/theoretical questions use specific stories or the Genesis text as a whole

1) what is the meaning of Abram being called by god, to leave his old world/life? How is faith and freedom related? Notice - new name, beginning or exodus, new faith vs inherited ways. Consider: If you can’t say no, then saying yes is meaningless. If you can't say yes, then you are sterile, trapped in negativity

2) what is the meaning of Abraham undertaking the sacrifice of Isaac? Why does god demand it, why does Abraham consent, what is the meaning of the outcome? Is faith ‘blind subjection” or is it “surrender” of self in its narrow possessive self (he does not ‘own’ Isaac) the condition of its thriving? (he gives up isaac, but does not in fact lose him. Do you own your children?)

3) What are the features of the god in these stories? How do you feel about this god? Is this god different than the god you expected? (Consider events like negotiating with Abraham.)

4) What does god want? (Submission? Covenant? Faith?) Is making a commitment (to god, to a mate, to a group, to a creed) the end of freedom or its manifestation? Is faith a condition of subjection or of thriving? Why circumcision, the only requirement God imposes so far?

5) does Genesis establish a moral order, or morality at all?

6) Sodom - should the “innocent” be harmed along with the guilty/wicked? Are the innocent responsible (and liable) for what their neighbors do? Am I simply responsible for what I alone do? When the American state acts am I not liable for what it does in my name? When there is institutionalized racism in my society, am I innocent of it if I am decent in my individual dealings one by one by one? What if it is we who live in Sodom, or Babylon, what if? We are totally inhospitable, we worship our power, and we are vain, that is, we believe we are the best and the beautiful, we mis-recognize who we are. Why assume you are standing with Abe beholding impending devastation and trying to forestall it?

7) Genesis initiates a kind of nation-building - territory, covenant, and defining a ‘people’- Does the story teach CONSENT or DESCENT as the basis of order? Both? If identity (a ‘we’) is built on difference (we are not them) what is the implication? What vision of community is offered here? -one constituted by faith and choice or commitment? A community held together by shared attachment to an IDEA? (But also by circumcision? Why that? Must difference and commitment be MARKED, that is, EMBODIED? Does it signify emasculation, a sacrifice as devotion?) By telling the story of Abraham as a founder, does the TEXT form a community that will be defined by genealogy rather than consent and choice?

8) Notice family, founders, rivalry - what is the political meaning of kinship? Are these founding fathers idealized or advertised as imperfect? Why? What is the role of women/wives/mothers? Why does the text emphasize rivalry? Notice the splitting of brothers - Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau - different “nations” are thereby founded. In the U.S. the “sons of founding fathers” call themselves Isaacs, and they call Indians and enslaved people “Ishmaels” - what is ‘the blessing,” who gets it, and why? (MLK insisted he was the true Isaac, defending the blessing whites betrayed; Malcolm X declared himself an Ishmael, embracing his outcast status. What is going on here?)

9) all fathers and sons? what about the women - mothers, daughters, sisters? is the text establishing patriarchy and hetero-normative kinship (as well as ‘tribes’) via codes of difference?

Letter Two: Imagining Politics

I. If we imagine politics as: collective self-fashioning - how people form and shape themselves as collective subjects (communities, nations, groups, peoples)- and thereby as individuals; as the exercise of power, as rule over, but also as rule-making and rule-remaking; as contests over who rules and how, over what we value and how, over how that 'we' is defined; as contest over our central constitutive practices (labor, sex, kinship, enculturating the young, etc) and the narratives we live by, then we partake in an "agonistic" view that politics (as contest) is inescapable and pervasive, but we also partake in a sense that 'the political' is not just about power, or about some ruling over others, and not just about contest in all domains of life, but also about the definition, character, and fate of a whole, a collectivity, a community, a we, a world. We need to see power and contest, to 'politicize' all institutions in that sense, but 'political' also denotes concern with 'res publica' -with the world we inhabit in common, albeit it in differentiated and typically unjust ways.

II. A "political" theory (or theology) addresses not just the pervasiveness of power across all the domains of life, but also how institutions and communities are constituted and reconstituted by creative action, conflict, and meaning-making. A 'political' theory analyzes the constitution of forms of life taken holistically, and, analyzes what would constitute 'the good life' -a life worthy of being valued. But many of the canonical political theorists have been anxious about politics (as simply enacting might makes right) and about democracy (as simply meaning tyranny of the many.) In response, they have stipulated transcendent truths, natural laws, scientific forms of knowledge, or categories of experts that promise to "settle" or even preclude conflict about power, justice, and the good life. That is the typical reading of "Plato" and of "the Bible" -these texts offer truths (by reason and by revelation) that preclude the ambiguity, plurality, and conflict that make politics inescapable. The irony of the political theory 'canon' is that many of its key texts are at war with the features of the human condition that make politics inescapable, necessary, and valuable.

III. Does the Bible take up the challenge of political life, or devalue and escape it? Does it teach us "answers" (orthodoxy -ortho/correct + doxa/opinion) to "settle" interpretive conflict? Does it teach us a sensibility that can live with and appreciate politics, or does it teach dispositions and sensibilities that pathologize politics or devalue it? Does the text promise escape from the conditions that make politics part of human life? To answer this question is to consider not only WHAT it says but HOW. (That is why we began by reading Stanley Fish, who distinguishes between texts that confirm reader's presuppositions and 'comfort' them, and those that create enigma and ambiguity through dramatizations that require interpretative arts, and make readers uncomfortable and reflective. The stories and texts in "the Bible" could be said to do both, but our work is to see where the text creates discomfort, self-reflection, and change - and we do so by continually monitoring our experience as readers.

IV. God, Creation, Eden

A. creation
*two creation stories:
* two gods:

* In one, god is a cosmic ruler, regal, constant, commanding, unapproachable, sovereign. humans are NOT the center, the creation exceeds us. God creates alone (by speech)
* In the other god is (like) a parent, nearby, intimate, volatile, anxious, changeable we are at the center of creation and participate in creation by our participation in language

Either way we are brought to wonder: why is there something rather than nothing? "Being" is entirely contingent, it might not have been. Also, god says "let there be" - as if giving permission, as if a midwife, as if naming bestows existence or reality on what we name. We bestow reality; we behold our creation; and it is good. God blesses creation; it is good, we are to be grateful (not take for granted) that there is something rather than nothing. What a miracle -of contingency- what a gift or blessing. Philosophy begins in wonder, Plato says - that there is something not nothing - and likewise, begins in appreciation or gratitude. Our original relation to the world is not "knowing" it but acknowledging that it is and feeling (and saying) 'it is good.'

B. What does God want in creating 'man'?
1. Think of Blake: Is 'god' the name of overflowing plenitude? Not an absent fullness but excessive overflowing creativity manifested in bodily beings? god is the name of the creative vitality of life and god wants an object, a creation, a beloved to behold and declare good. god is an artist creating a creation - we are (part of) god's creation; we embody that creativity. The infinite is in a grain of sand - god is not absolute transcendence of mortal bodies, but the immanent vitality and 'genius' that animates them. But also, god wants company: is there a god without a creation? (I.e. why does god believe that adam wants/needs company?) God is looking for his own IMAGE? God makes man 'in his image,' but what image is that? and can God even know what his image is, until he can behold it? In turn, if we embody that image, what are WE to make of our being? But don't forget Laclau's claim that the 'point' of the idea of god is that we are finite, and CANNOT embody the universal or transcendent, and that "god" is the name that constantly reminds us of our our finitude and limits, the limits and failures of language to capture reality.

C. Eden:
Use Adam Phillips: Don't read the parable (only) as children refusing parental tyranny; and don't read the story (only) as parents anxiously imposing order on evil disobedient children. Read the parable as requiring BOTH parental and the child's points of view, which changes each of them. Don't read the story (only) as human history occurs because of/as god's punishment for 'original sin.' that concept does not appear. god is fearful people will eat the tree of life and become like a god, immortal, a rival to him. The story sets and names the terms of the human estate -we are mortal, sexed, laboring creatures, and suffer in each regard, and, we are historical beings who live in time, and social beings who must make the world we inhabit. What Adam Phillips says about truant adolescents is true about the biblical story of Eden: it is a kind of tragedy that affirms BOTH the necessity of rules AND the necessity for breaking them. The point is to keep the tension alive, in ourselves and in our world -to see the value of rules and truancy, both. Perhaps the story teaches what Blake calls a "contrary" -not a moral dichotomy between law (good) and sin (bad) -because there is no learning or true subjectivity without transgression, which teaches us the meaning of agency and responsibility. Moreover, truancy is good because it is the wish for something other, for something otherwise, beyond the given. The creative ones, those Blake calls 'the prolific' are always truants. For Blake THIS is the "diabolic" reading of

Eden. But Phillips, unlike Blake, also emphasizes that truants may be living within fantasy of being self-generating, omnipotent, sovereign, able to do whatever they want without consequences. It is only by action/transgression -and the experience of the consequences of action- that they learn the difference between their fantasies and reality. there is a 'role' for parents -that encounter with the outside, with consequences. Thus, to RESOLVE the tension between rules and truancy, by an obstinate holding to one or the other, produces violence and compliance, orthodoxy or negation, and stalemate and misery.

Remember what is LACKING in "paradise" - self-consciousness or self-awareness, alienation, self-division. Do we WANT to erase these when we lament our expulsion from the garden? What do we want to go back to? A lack of consciousness and responsibility? Maybe we are ambivalent about our adulthood? Read the story, therefore, not as punishment, but as stating consequences: to enter full humanity is to enter a state of knowledge/self-consciousness, including awareness of death, as well as conditions involving labor, sexuality, and judgment (of good and evil) and quickly, in the next story, we also see disagreement/rivalry. What does it mean that people say life is punishment for an original sin, as if the human condition were a curse?

Blake might say: the 'fall' means we lose our grasp of the infinite in a grain of sand, that is, of the infinite energy in being, but we can "return" to paradise in the sense of regaining that perception, that imagination of creation. Is that being "as a child" again? But Blake is not going back before self-consciousness - on the contrary - poetic genius is the fullest possible articulation of consciousness in symbolic forms. Though he imagines asking Isaiah - "does a firm persuasion that a thing is so make it so?" And Isaiah says, in poetic ages, yes, but in skeptical times like your own, no. For Blake, prophetic/poetic genius recaptures the playfulness, immersion in experience, and imaginative capacity we identity with children -a capacity Nietzsche later calls 'the sacred yes, the self-propelling wheel" we need to escape modern nihilism.

D. what about Cain?
An infernal reading would say - god defends Cain, even after he murders Abel, so that can must learn to live with the consequences of his aggression, but also as he is deprived of the land he once farmed, and forced into a kind of exile, he founds the first city. This parable of fratricide is the first story about conflict -ending in violence - but generates city-building. Is there again a 'contrary' rather than a dichotomy at work here? Yes, god is so arbitrary -favoring one child's sacrifice over the other's. God is very close to life in these early texts (not just like actual parents) but supremely arbitrary, and how can we endure the arbitrariness of god/life without succumbing to resentment? (god says to Cain, dont succumb to it, that is the 'sin' crouching at your door.')Should god be different than life, i.e. impersonally just, consistent, treating all equally? why? Should god be about morality, so to speak, not a force of life/death that seems a-moral? Why? Why should GOD be about morality? Why can't god be another name for (the breath of) life?

E. East of Eden:
George says, politics appears east of Eden, in the land of Nod. We are the heirs of Cain though Eden reveals the elements of the estate he and we inherit: We lack self-sufficiency, purity, and harmony. We are compelled to labor and sex, to speech, to judging good and evil. We are subject to desire and need, to rivalry and aggression because we are incomplete and plural and rivalrous.

We are subject to contingency because we are historical beings. We are finite, mortal, sentient, also driven and willful, at once capable of blindness and nobility, of selfishness and sacrifice, of exploitation and justice. Eve is curious, she desires knowledge, she acts in ways that Adam Phillip calls 'truant,' because she tests god's authority. Having left the garden, the question is: what are we going to do? How are we going to exercise (and understand) our dominion, make our judgments, negotiate our differences? How are we going to channel our energy, direct our agency? What forms of limitation are there? Law is NOT natural, nor is authority. So the text compels or raises fundamental questions: by what authority do we orient ourselves? With whom do we identify and on what basis? (How do we define or construct that 'we'?) In what will our redemption consist? (Which means: how will we define the purpose or meaning of our lives?) Thus, ask yourself, how does the text respond to this east-of-eden circumstance? By giving us a god whose sovereign authority establishes law and morality to stabilize a life always undone by forces of chaos? By blaming us (our willfulness, or desire, our freedom) for a "fall" into a world characterized by politics? By giving us a text with a clear (theological/moral) message? What do Auerbach and Fish say?

F. Babel:
Recall Laclau's reading of god, which always emphasizes the finitude of humans, the limits of language. Babel is about god keeping us to the limits of finitude, not as a punishment, but as a limit that sets the terms of human life. Because of god's act, there is now plurality of cultures and languages, not unity and homogeneity. What would Blake say? God worries that people can do whatever they imagine: why is this a problem? Would Blake want us to believe in just this capacity of imagination? Or is there a reality principle that needs to be recognized?

V. Modes of Interpretation

A. Auerbach's idea of the bible asserting absolute truth and making a 'tyrannical' claim on its readers is related to Stanley Fish's claim that a text can be didactic, or "rhetorical" in his terms- as it imposes an absolute truth. For Fish, a dogmatic text claims authority over reality, and gives us the sense of certainty about what reality is - a comforting feeling - so that dogmatic texts are 'rhetorical' in the sense that they make us feel comfortable. BUT also notice Auberbach's claim that the "enigmatic" style of the narrative generates endless interpretation, which relates to Fish's idea of a "dialectical" text -a text that defeats our given assumptions and expectations, and as it makes us uncomfortable, it impels us into responsibility for interpretation amidst ambiguities it dramatizes rather than resolves. By these comparisons I mean to suggest that the text is BOTH (dogmatic/didactic) AND" (open-ended, interrogatory), BOTH comforting (in the beginning, a god/author is sovereign, who knows best, who knows everything) AND disturbing -this god seems like a lunatic and human beings are wild, excessive, disobedient.

B. Texts WORK in certain ways, to promote certain experiences. Fish shows how two different texts can carry the same message or content -asserting that reality is uncertain- but one text tells us reality is uncertain in a tone and style of certainty, so that the style contradicts the message or meaning -that life is uncertain- whereas the other text produces an experience of uncertainty in the WAY it expresses the idea of uncertainty, so that the HOW of the text not only communicates but induces an experience of the WHAT (the uncertainty it asserts.) Many authors and texts didactically tell us there is uncertainty about reality and truth, but do so with certainty, and by

giving us an experience of certainty about the truth of uncertainty, as opposed to texts that DO what they say, creating an experience of uncertainty. The central idea here is to look at the HOW of a text, not just the WHAT, for indeed what really matters is the experience a text induces -what it 'does'- not what it overtly "says" or declares.

C. There may be two different modes of reading ANY text - the priestly vs the infernal for Blake, the truant vs the pious for Phillips- and a text may support both kinds of reading. Imagine, we can be readers who SEEK certainty or orthodoxy -to find or establish an authority to obey. Plato wrote in dialogue form, with characters who were not him -Socrates is a character not Plato's mouthpiece- but for two thousand years readers have ignored massive textual evidence, as well as the dialogue form itself, to insist there is "platonic" philosophy. NO ONE knows what the author, Plato, actually thought, we only have his dialogues and characters. He wrote in dialogue form to try to defeat that/our need to fix or finalize all the issues his dialogues in fact kept open, but there still developed an orthodoxy about 'what plato taught." Jesus spoke in parables, which require interpretation and enable multiple and conflicting interpretations, and I think he did so for the same reason as Plato -to defeat our insistence on orthodoxy. But the enigmatic Jesus was turned into doctrine and churches.

D. I would object to Fish's use of "rhetorical" as another word for dogmatic and pandering - in effect Plato's argument against what he called 'rhetoric' to justify what he called 'philosophy." I would rather say that ALL texts are "rhetorical" in three specific senses -(1) they work with and within doxa - opinion - and enact meaning-making, even when they make claims about truth; (2) they are engaged in persuasion, are directed at an audience, are speech-acts that can be 'felicitous' or not with the audiences that take them up or not, or take up the speech-act in very different ways the author cannot control –and (3) all texts involve figuration, figurative language that moves readers/audiences emotionally, so that philosophy itself -as we see in Plato- requires metaphors to make arguments persuasive

Letter Three: Ideas of Politics, Ideas of God, and Versions of Faith

Preface: I am urging you to read the bible in two ways that go against the grain, against preconceptions you are likely to bring to it.

I. One way we read against the grain is by interpreting the text as doing political theory, as addressing/analyzing and dramatizing what is fundamental about POLITICS, and every week I will try to clarify what I mean by that. So let me say again to read it as a "political" text, as a work of "political theory" is to see it as ASKING or RAISING -as teaching you to ask- but also as ANSWERING (albeit in ambiguous ways)- fundamental "political" questions or fundamental questions about politics. What questions?

(A) authority -by what authority do we now, and should we instead, orient ourselves in our individual and collective lives? We can answer that question by saying - the constitution - or "morality" - or "conscience" or the will of the majority -"the voice of the people is the voice of god"- or public opinion or "the meida" or "idols" or "God" . As every answer indicates, to orient by an authority may be the very basis of our (sense of our) freedom. The assumption of the text is that we always follow ("obey" or orient by) authority - but which? And which kind of authority enables us to fashion ourselves as a "free" persons or as a free people? (This is central to exodus in the contrast of Pharaoh and God, or of leaders like Aaron compared to Moses, but also think - how do you define a "good" parent or teacher....) You already LIVE by orienting yourself toward certain ideas/people/institutions that you endow with authority, but you also continually distinguish (judge) how presidents, teachers, leaders, parents exercise authority. Do they fail as authorities? The authority you live by (what god, what first principle, what "faith") shapes fundamentally who you become -and who we become collectively; we become certain sorts of subjects, individually and collectively, by how we imagine authority and live out your relation to it. There is no more important question in your life. You may say, with Kant, I live out my life in terms of the categorical imperative - that is the "Moral" answer as many moderns understand it- an answer anchored in reason not faith Kant says - but we are also democrats who live by majority rule, or by constitutions etc. These authorities can conflict! How are we to manage that conflict? (Such is the origin of greek tragedy.) In the end this is a political question not at first an existential question because the authority of ideas (of god or principles) or of institutions or of people are always collective and inter-subjective - and precede you -bring you into existence - like parents- and then we come to be who we are as we engage them, not only singly but collectively.

(B) the second fundamental question the text asks concerns community: how do we form communities? What enables them to continue? What is the glue? I put this question in this form: with whom do we identify and on what basis? This is the "we" question. Politics always involves the forming and re-construction of a "we" that is likely in conflict with other "we's" –these are not pre-existent formations, but achievements –at once essential and very costly, very valuable and dangerous. Your sense of yourselves as individual, in fact, is the product of a specific "we" –not only the Judaic-Christian moral schema, which teaches you about individual conscience, but also the "American" cultural we that values individualism. The biblical assumption is also that communities are not automatic or eternal - they are artifacts, and transient. The bible uses the family as a metaphor for community. (This metaphor is problematic in many ways, but we are still led to ask: what holds people together in tribes, groups, nations? How are we joined in some

ways and divided in others? In Genesis we are offered answers to these questions in images of rivalry and conflict, ideas of covenant (promises based on consent), and circumcision. Step back and keep asking - how does the text show us how a "Hebrew" people - a particular political community - forming itself? I want to say that this is the second most important question in our lives, fundamental in every way -with whom do I identify and on what basis? As an "American" - why that? Conceived how, with what consequences? As a member of the working class? As a child of god? That can be in response to how others identify me, and how they identify me can be decisive in my own self-identification and who I stand with. But Americans -typically - enact the "we" - they answer the question of the "we" but without ever asking it -especially in regard to race and gender. All of politics rests in how people revise inherited answers to these questions. When we think about health insurance, or race, or genocide, the "we" question is central. Who is a member with me? With whom do I stand? Especially if you imagine yourself standing 'alone,' you bespeak a (white, male, propertied) we.

(C)Exodus will re-stage these two fundamental questions -by what authority do you/should you orient?- and -with whom do you identify and on what basis? - i.e. the question of community. As you already are seeing, the text shows us issues of power, inequality, and conflict (rivalry) as well as the exercise of speech and coercion -it is not an idealized account of authority or of community, but shows every seam, every flaw, every dilemma. I am emphasizing and will repeat every week that these issues are lost if you read the text as demonstrating THE one and only "moral" LAW or right(eous) way to live. Indeed to focus on the "moral" in this way is to put the story backwards - the invention of morality has not happened yet, it is only emerging in Genesis, and it comes out of the formation of a particular community. For it is the particular community that will carry the universal (that will see itself as carrying the one god of the universe, and the one moral rule, good in all times and places) -to replace every other god (now seen as fictions or idols) and every other code of life (now seen as immoral). The invention of morality comes out of, is part of, the politics of a community in history. The text does not <u>start</u> with morality. And I will say, over and over, that in the end it is not teaching "morality" in a doctrinaire sense. It is showing us the origin - the bloody and problematic origin -of what we call morality, but thereby putting us in a more self-critical or ironical -I would say ethical- relationship to what we think morality is or means.

II. The second way I am encouraging you to read the text 'against the grain' is to resist the impulse to read the text in "Christian" terms -even secular Jews often do this -by imposing certain assumptions about GOD, and about where the narrative MUST be going -its goal or purpose, its "end," its endpoint. Let me focus now on the idea of god in Genesis. Surely, this is not the god you expect, but this is a way to see (and so rethink) what you expect "god" to be!

A. Consider the contrast between our preconceptions about "god" -about what a god should be (like)- and the god we encounter in the text. The god we encounter seems angry (though angry about human wrong-doing -Cain and Sodom- and therefore a god with some sense of justice), capable of regret about his acts and creations, arbitrary (and so unjust?) in favoring one son over another, and changeable. Not omniscient or omnipotent but insecure or jealous. We feel outrage, disapproval, disappointment. **So ask: why did the Hebrews imagine a god like this?** Why imagine a god in OUR all-too-human image? How could THIS be a "true" god, or really a god? But also ask: what do WE (here and now) believe a god is supposed to be? Not arbitrary,

indignant or regretful, but ethical, consistent, rational, impersonal, truly universal, unmoved by any emotion except love? Also ask: what is this our expectation? What does this orthodox expectation (idea/name of God) illuminate or obscure? what does it entail? how is it incomplete?

To ask about the "idea" of god is to ask a philosophic, indeed, platonic question. When Plato tried to imagine the "form" of what he called "the good," that is, the essence of goodness as a concept, he said it must be pure or unalloyed (no bad mixed with good), absolutely good, eternal and unchanging, consistent rather than arbitrary. We imagine the essence of god as (like) the "form of the good," and indeed, there is a cross-over between Platonism and Christianity, and the philosophic idea of "the good" -that we can access by our reason- in many ways is the rational end of the monotheist revolution (the idea of the good by way of reason not by faith in a "god" that is good.) As we look at the long history of christianity we see (the idea of) god become increasingly abstract, impersonal, rational, all good, all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful, etc. Not so much a figure ACTING IN history, as a REALITY behind it, a meta-physical (beyond-nature) order and reality that is distinct from the phenomenal chaos we perceive, yet this invisible reality also provides the telos, the hidden but true purpose that makes sense of (helps us to explain and endure) what is going on in the worldly "realm" perceptible to our senses. God becomes a "true" (though often hidden) reality "behind" (but shaping) the observable (Plato says "apparent") world. Our idea of god is that a "god" is supposed to be UNLIKE "life." Yahweh thus seems too close to (or tainted by) life and nature. We may want a fully abstract, pure, perfectly "spiritual" reality, apart from life, to call "god." But by imagining such a "true world," Nietzsche says, we "devalue the actual world." That is, we INVENT a "true" world against which we devalue the "merely apparent" world of our senses and bodies, our perceptions and opinions. What characterizes this "actual" world beyond which we put a "true" reality? The contingent and arbitrary? Flux and uncertainty? Danger and risk? Aggression and violence? Power and injustice? Rivalry, envy, and conflict? FREEDOM? So, when we imagine a god apart from reality, what are we abstracting from?

Nietzsche thus says that Christianity is "Platonism for the masses" because the Christian idea of god -rationally consistent, never arbitrary, only good, all-forgiving, unconditionally loving, and eternal- is Plato's 'the good' in more palatable mythic form, a "true" moral order apart from life, to help us make sense of and endure our suffering life. Many of us, even those who may be Jews, are "Christians" in this sense: we are the heirs to the "Christianization" of god into a form of the good, so our expectations of what god is or must be to be 'god,' reflect a Christian-dominated history and the culmination of monotheism as it developed the idea of divinity to make the universe at once moral and rational. (For the good will prosper and the evil will suffer; those who suffer deserve what happens to them because they are wicked, or, they will be vindicated in the next life.)

To read Genesis is to go "behind" this (christian) view of god. Yahweh is closer to Zeus in many ways. And at many moments the text acknowledges that there are other gods, though readers are encouraged to say: Yahweh is OUR god and we will have no other gods. Later, the text says there is only ONLY ONE god, and only one (right) way to live, and all other peoples worship idols, i.e. false or non-gods. But in Genesis it doesn't really say that (except in the creation chapter) -other peoples have their gods, we have our's.

I should add that our disappointment also arises from the fact that God seems way too "human" - "human all-too human." and how can we reverence a god who is so like us? But what is this to say? Inconsistent, arbitrary, not omniscient, not omnipotent? Unjust? Subject to emotion? Also capable of generosity, justice, righteous indignation, regret? Obviously

incommensurable with us, and yet recognizable and even proximate, walking with us. For we are made in god's image, right? So, by imagining god in this way, again, what are the Hebrews doing, how are they imagining themselves?

B.Anthropological approaches to God and "religion"
Feuerbach and Marx argued that "man" invents "gods" - that gods are projections of our own imaginations and aspirations. Blake says it is poetic genius that imagines gods, and that different cultures create different gods. I myself tend toward thinking this way, but I want to add an important alternative perspective, because the Hebrew poets who wrote these texts did not think they were 'projecting' their own imaginations, not exactly. As I understand the text, 'god' is their name of (metaphor for) the absolutely real, Reality, Life with a big L - a totality beyond language, beyond any human representation, an absolute reality that cannot be represented, and if we took any representation as true, we would succumb to idolatry - mistaking the representation for the reality. (that is why protestants destroyed images, and why the second commandment says no graven images.) So the 'lesson' here is about the limits of our imagination and our representations, as Laclau argues. The absolute alterity of this force, this reality - I am that I am - discloses our finitude. However, Blake also thought that we could aspire to sense the infinity in a grain of sand, but it is infinity, so our sense of it means that any one thing contains more than itself, and more than we can ever exhaust, and this may be a third alternative to both the certainty of orthodox religion and to Laclau's skepticism, a kind of incarnation of the infinite in the immanent. For Blake focuses on our creative power, which we share with god -which is the 'god' -the poetic genius - in us. It is necessary to create images or metaphors to grasp reality at all, and they are needed to create a world "in our image" also. For Blake, therefore, the meaning of Jesus is this incarnation of god in/as man. not god as a static truth or fixed representation, but rather as the generative power that projects, embodies, objectifies, dramatizes and communicates, that brings forth the world. The "anthropological" view, as it were an objective or scientific view from outside a faith or poetic vision, as if the observer can see reality and the poet is trapped in fiction, is easily dismissive or reductionist, missing the necessity and power of metaphor to see at all. The anthropological view can lose the realities carried by -and inaccessible without- what Wallace Stevens called the 'supreme fiction' that figures them forth.

C. To "defend" Yahweh against our disappointment or judgments I would say:

1) God is free/humans are free: we are created in god's image, and god is a creator. God has no fixed identity prior to action; god is an existentialist, who becomes who he is by acting, and by coping with and learning from the consequences. When God meets Moses in Exodus, God says, "I am what I am" (which translates also as "I will be what I will be.") Not a substance but a breath, an energy. a verb not only a noun. God is a creator, and free, which means what for us?

(a) we enter into a relationship with god as separate yet related -that is why covenants are necessary, to bind free actors, or rather, actors with freedom can honor their nature only by making covenants, i.e. by promises or bonds that respect the freedom of the parties. God seeks an image of himself (as do we), a child, but also a partner, an agent, a people, a lover, a spouse -who is also free. That is why there is a relationship -and- conflict, complaint, disappointment, divorce, abandonment, etc. The key and often supremely difficult thing is to acknowledge the separate reality of that other, which we cannot control but on which we depend for recognition of our own

reality. (How can I be a god if I am not recognized by my creation?) To deny the separateness and yet inter-dependence of this relation with our 'big other' is to deny our finitude, pretend we are sovereign - what christians later call "pride." the god of creation seems 'sovereign' of course, but at every point in the bible, this god is thwarted, frustrated, challenged, and educated in justice by his human creations.

(b) god is "jealous" (we might say insecure?) because we are free and because there are other gods -and we are inclined to promiscuity! -we prefer easier partners! Rivalry and jealousy characterize god and man as free beings who cannot be compelled to attachment, and who CAN make other/different choices. God wants and needs FREELY OFFERED "worship" –to force attachment is to betray the freedom of each party -to coerce the other is to contradict the meaning of a relationship that the Bible soon characterizes in terms of LOVE (parent and child as well as husband and wife.) We are creatures made in god's image: we need a partner and yet we can't abide their being a separate reality either.

(c)god is free, capable of changing, of creating the unexpected - so, there can be new revelations, new covenants, just as god can learn. Why should there be only one covenant or constitution, never amended, the same forever? Can god re-imagine an earlier revelation or covenant? Can we? Because god is free he is capable of learning, of being persuaded to (decide to) act differently. So Abe can "reason" with god about Sodom, just as prophets reason with you.

(2) when god wants our worship or recognition is that egotistical? -or- is god claiming that we, trapped in OUR egotism, cannot recognize REALITY, the huge and often invisible forces of life beyond our narrow view, which we must acknowledge -or we cannot flourish. (WHAT is it we must recognize when we recognize "god"? If god is the name for the life-forces we cannot "know" and cannot control, what kind of relationship are we establishing with those forces by way of imagining a relationship to this god?) At some level, this god is the very force of life and so of death -god giveth and god taketh away- the force of nature in its eternal creativeness and destructiveness, but personified as a character even as that character says only I am that I am. Independent of our will, but in relation to us, (the idea of) this god teaches our finitude. Life (or god) is in EXCESS of what imagine. God is excessive, not yet "moral" but capable of self-limitation (by making promises -e.g. no more floods.) This is one vision of God as reality itself, "beyond good and evil," the generative force of creation itself, of being, the force that itself lies behind and calls forth morality. I am that I am. I will be what I will be. I am generative most of all. I am author/creator, and poets thus represent the human capacity to create, act, and change -and destroy. My speech is action, I create by speech, —and you are in my image. God in Genesis is the breath of life, not unlike or apart from life, not (yet) a source of law or morality. Genesis to a huge degree is an account of life before "morality" as a system or code. There is not yet a (god-given) moral order in life, though there are glimmers of that when god says don't kill each other. God is linked to "the law" only in Exodus, at Sinai. What then is LOST when god becomes more impersonal and consistent, more a platonic ideal of the good?

3) If god is close to life/death, then God IS arbitrary (or plays favorites) because LIFE (and death) does. So god says to Cain -life is unjust, but don't let your resentment rule you, and if you can handle your resentment then you can act constructively about it and I'll reward you, but Cain can't master his resentment at life, and he kills Abel. (Even then God doesn't kill Cain, but

protects him as if to ensure that he will have to live with and learn from his deed.) Here we see the origin of justice, too: injustice is done to Cain, and then Cain does injustice to Abel. (Was it Abel's fault that God preferred meat? Is it god's fault that he likes meat? Still, he says to Cain, aren't you your brother's keeper?) "Life" is arbitrary and life is not moral, but we try to establish "moral" criteria (i.e. rules of fairness of justice) to govern our relations toward each other. Since Cain, God enacts and so teaches both life's injustice, and our need to be keepers of each other.

4) judgment: God's blessing to the Hebrews goes from being almost unconditional (as long as you circumcise yourselves I'll bless you, he says to Abraham) to being conditional (after Exodus) on ethical conduct -you lose god's blessing, your nation is destroyed, if you don't live justly, say the prophets. Is this "conditional love" unacceptable? Do we want a god that is unconditionally loving, that blesses us regardless of our behavior? (Nietzsche celebrated not the god who is judgmental, but the god who blesses his people unconditionally, as if to say, we are pleased to be the people we are, we think life agrees with us, we are not stricken by a bad conscience, we like what we do and we call it good. Nietzsche worried when god becomes the judgmental god who creates in people a bad conscience about what they do.)

5) God is not only equated with life/death, because God "chooses" a people. Every people has their own god. (Every people imagine a creator god who values them most of all?) Monotheism moves toward a kind of universality (we are ALL the equal children of THE ONE GOD.) But why not different gods for different people, each god seeking the flourishing of his or her people? Why not people imagining different gods? Why not a god who seeks OUR flourishing? Why not a god who fights on our behalf for our flourishing, when we have adversaries and even enemies who threaten our very existence? Why not a POLITICAL god (to the degree that politics is linked to a PARTICULAR COMMUNITY)? Like Polymarchus in the first book of Plato's The Republic, Genesis (and Exodus) define justice as "helping friends" -fellow citizens/ fellow slaves or subalterns- and "hurting enemies" -threatening nations, egyptian overseers, colonial/imperial powers. In politics there ARE friends and enemies and this god is not only a god of a people but brings some humans INTO existence as 'a people,' a political community, as an autonomous community. We are upset because this god seems too attached to a cause, a group, in the struggle between groups? What if every group has its god? On the other hand, what if our flourishing is at the expense of others? Does the Hebrew god justify this? Does our god condone or even foster domination of some by others? Would we rather have a god that is a moral umpire standing above all groups and nations and states, who adjudicates their claims, who declares who is just and who is not, who is worthy and who is not? Do we want a god who says (as Socrates says) - justice means harming no one, who asserts that it is better to suffer injustice than inflict it, that we should identify always with those who are excluded or oppressed? This view, articulated by Jesus, follows from the prophets, who revise what god requires of us.

In Genesis we see the creation of a "people," partly by blood i.e. genealogy, and partly by covenant and its circumcising marks, a people defined partly by descent and partly by consent. The text asks and teaches us to ask: what makes a people? How indeed is community constituted? How is identity or solidarity produced? We see a shift from creation and an account of HUMAN life, to a story about patriarchs and a particular people (who live out that human condition.) It is part of the Bible's "political" meaning, George says, that it focuses on a PARTICULAR people and its constitution. Every community (or people or nation) requires its

origin story, its story of origins is part of defining who or what it is. Narrative and identity (narrative and 'imagined community') are deeply tied. Not exactly narrative ABOUT an already existing "we," but rather narrative as CONSTITUTING a we, bringing forth a we where there was no such grouping before. Constituted in speech and by story. In that story "Hebrew" originates in leaving family, paternal house, local gods, in Abe's act of rupture, disaffiliation —and then new bonds by way of covenant (and wives and children.) AND, that story teaches about collective life by using the trope of family, a family divided by jealousy and rivalry between brothers for a blessing. Rivalry is a metaphor for political conflict and the motivations behind it. If the idea of blessing or legitimacy generates rivalry, and rivalry both defines and threatens family life, the question remains: how are this people to flourish? On what basis?

6) So god is not only the forces of life-and-death, but also teaches people to covenant, to make promises and live by them, and this god identifies worship with covenant-making. What does this god want: he wants us to live by covenants. What does it mean to obey this god: to live by the covenant we make with him and each other. There is not yet the idea of a universal moral law, but there is the idea of covenants. I think this makes this god unlike others, and unlike Pharaoh. Covenant makes this god more like an authority than a tyrant, but the question of authority continues to be the central question in the text. Don't assume that the people are "already" free and that god takes it away; maybe their very capacities for agency only come by way of learning (being forced to learn?) the practice of covenanting....

Letter Four: From Genesis to Exodus

I. Genesis & God: How do the poets imagine THEMSELVES by how they imagine a god?

A. Imagine Genesis means beginning, and beginning means creation, initiation, inauguration. Beginning means creation through speech, also means delight in what we create. God is a creator, beginner, actor, initiating, creating what did not exist before. We are made in god's image. CREATING=ACTING=SPEAKING…TO WHOM? HOW IS AN ACT/SPEECH TAKEN UP? WHAT ARE ITS (UNINTENDED) CONSEQUENCES?

B. God is (the name of) absolute reality, but is completely enigmatic; we can't"know" god but must instead acknowledge THAT god/reality IS (excessive, overwhelming, enigmatic, pressing, generative….). (God says in Exodus, I am that/what I am -I will be what I will be.) Not a substance but a breath or energy. (Blake - god is action not substance, by way of other beings.) God is (a name for) the manifestation or reality of LIFE -that which giveth and taketh away. The force of LIFE in its eternal creativeness and destructiveness, personified as a character, but always in excess of what we imagine. God is excessive, not lawful or law bound or moral, beyond good and evil, not even subject to our conventions of good and evil. Because god is free, he is capable of acting arbitrarily or differently, of breaking patterns, of being persuaded to at differently, of initiating new creations and relations. How can we acknowledge these absolute, powerful forces/realities? What sort of relation is possible? But also, THIS god wants people to covenant with: why? -for that would "bind" god. It is amazing -this god needs to be in relation, to be recognized; needs a people to recognize him, as if that were a condition of his own sense of his reality? Imagine humans created in this god's image - images, mirrors, relations

C. God created free beings in god's image. God thus wants beings who covenant, who enter into relations as chosen but binding commitments because this is what free beings do to make relations. This god teaches humans to make and keep promises, and does so partly by teaching that acts have consequences, partly by holding people accountable. God does not ONLY want a docile child, but also a free being, a lover or spouse, a partner, a people.

On the one hand, free beings make relations in the form of covenant. We express our freedom not just by creating and beginning, but also by making commitments -to gods, ideals, others - as commitments are acts of faith. "We hold these truths (of a god, an ideal) self-evident." To covenant is to make a promise, to "hold" something as true for us, to "hold" a "we" together. We dedicate ourselves to make good on the promise. We may fail, we may betray the promise, but we take shape, we develop by way of such commitments. We can RENEW (make a-new) an old commitment, we can MODIFY it. We can declare the necessity for a NEW covenant to replace the one we call old, outdated or problematic though many may want to remain oriented by what for them is the only/true covenant. (Think about this with constitutions and amendments) Covenant sets the terms of living, the terms of identity. Other peoples live by tyranny subject to coercion or by despotism sustained by enforced or blind obedience, but we live by covenants, i.e. by freely making a commitment to DO certain things, and FORGO other things, and in a chosen bond with others/god. Freedom is in this conditional form -we promise to do X and not do Y. (Partly because, If we do Y, we will be unable to do X.)

On the other hand, the relation of free beings means there is conflict, disappointment, complaint, accusation, negotiation, bargaining, plea, violation, infidelity, abandonment, divorce,

failure. There are many signs (including the use of coercion or bribes) that the bond is failing, or rather, no bond is "pure," all bonds are complicated and motivations are complicated. The bible does not idealize covenant, they are always imperfect, but the making of covenants is seen as definitional for free beings and for this people. In any relation, the key thing is to acknowledge the separate reality of the other, which means acknowledge our lack of sovereignty - of unilateral control. Each (god and humans, partners, citizens) must depend on their other, who cannot be controlled. Still, Abe can reason with God, just as prophets later try to reason with us. The relational aspect seems so profound and important -unlike the impersonal, distant "transcendent" god of the first creation story. This god is both beyond-human, like life itself, and all-too-human.

D. God is a beginner and creator, so are we. Beginning means leaving 'the old' to initiate the new. Leaving Eden is a beginning, Cain exiled is a beginning; Abe being summoned is a beginning. Beginning, a capacity to begin, is freedom. A beginning also means rupture (leaving old gods, traditions, parents, a dis-identification, an exodus) and loss (of what/who we loved -even if we also hated it as oppressive). Beginning can feel (and be) transgressive, criminal, breaking the rules, and it can feel terrifying - entering the unknown. Creation and beginning are important aspects of freedom. Beginning is a leap of faith (When exiled, Cain says I will die, how can I live, and god says, my mark will protect you -but Cain does not know what he will do, make of his exile, how he will begin again.) Abe is summoned, but he is making a leap of faith, into the unknown -imagine guilt at leaving, the risk of failure, the terror of not knowing -but all unsaid by the text that creates depths by its silences. What does it take to begin? "Obeying" a call, an idea, a principle, a dream - that is what carries you beyond your old self, and as you act your transform yourself, your are transformed. But is this "obey" in its submissive sense or would you say, invest in, commit to, risk yourself for, act on behalf of?

E. George says, the bible teaches that faith is ubiquitous. There is always faith underlying any form of life - faith in kings, states, in reason or science, in pharoahs, in leaders, in demagogues, in prophets, in idea(l)s . But not all faiths are equal or the same in impact - we become different people or culture depending both on WHAT we put faith in, and on HOW we practice it. (Practice faith through priests, by individual conscience, by a liturgy collectively enacted daily, etc. Practice faith in freedom by accumulating property or working to abolish it. Practice a faith in god by dismissing other views of god, or by practicing pluralism and forbearance?) Faith in what god? Practiced how? To ask about the authority we orient by is to ask how we conceive and practice faith -in what, in whom, how. What is the difference between putting faith in Hitler, or Trump -or? - in the democratic process? We are always creatures of faith, but how a faith works, its impact on the shaping of selves and worlds, varies enormously, and we are called (by the text) to make judgments, but by what criteria? In Exodus this is perhaps the crucial question. Most Hebrews in Egypt have not worshiped god for a long time. They don't feel/live faith. What will (re)establish it? What must God and Moses do? What do the People want from this God and Moses as authorities? When do the people lose faith, why? when god or moses lose faith, why? Imagine again a relation involving a full spectrum of emotions and aspects. Watch the relation between faith and freedom in Exodus.

II. Faith, Authority, Covenant, Freedom

Does an act of commitment -enacting a faith that binds you to a person, institution, or ideal- mean you have abdicated or manifested your freedom? When you "marry" someone, are you giving up or realizing your freedom? (Both? Then freedom in what senses?) When you make the commitment to live a certain way, by a certain principle (the idea of equality) or say the 10 commandments, are you giving up your freedom or giving it meaning and embodiment? When you choose to obey a god, are you relinquishing your freedom or discovering it? The assumption of Americans, indoctrinated by liberal ideology, is that faith and authority are antithetical to freedom, because they define freedom simply as the absence of all constraints. They define freedom as freedom FROM. But while the bible surely sees this (freedom FROM Egypt) there is another part to the grammar of freedom - freedom TO - you are free because you CAN do something - freedom here is linked to POWER or capacity - does the Bible story suggest this idea of freedom, too? And how are we to understand what it means to make a promise or a commitment? It is surely the case that there cannot be a meaningful YES unless we have the ability to say NO. The premise of dialogue and covenants is that people can REFUSE. But a life defined by saying "no" is no life. What does it mean to say "yes"? Faith is not just belief, but action and commitment, and no principle is meaningful unless we "obey" it, that is, try to embody it in our lives. but the word 'obedience' needs to be re-translated as fidelity or commitment, or as embodiment. To 'obey' god, therefore, is to live how? By covenant? By living out the laws we covenant to? How is that to live? (What do we do, how do we live, when we "obey" or "worship" god? what becomes possible for us, and impossible? what becomes desirable and worthy, or undesirable and unworthy?

III. Membership: with whom do we identify and on what basis?

It is grossly unjust that Sarah arranges for Hagar to bear a child, and then repudiates them, and that Abe allows it. Abe is repeatedly cowardly (don't forget his lying about Sarah in Egypt). god says, let it happen - god is always playing catch up. For the blessing only goes to one son. (Recall that Isaac preferred Esau, just as God once preferred Abel. Things don't work out the way authorities plan, often because formally disenfranchised women are still agents of disruption and change. But here we see the origins of the "chosen people" thematic, which seems linked not just to difference - we are one tribe among many - but we are chosen by god. Notice: at first, it might have been that we are supported by OUR god, as we emerge into our own identity, and those other tribes have THEIR gods; and indeed, the "hebrew" god is in fact the marriage of two Canaanite deities. But there is also here the claim that god has chosen US; we are 'the chosen people,' unlike every other people, who don't have this BLESSING. I think this is a much later (prophetic) claim that is here being read backwards into Genesis as if history. For some strands, the later monarchy and its claim to territory and sovereignty is being justified as fulfilling god's ancient founding promise to the founding fathers, and the sense of conflict with other tribes and empires (at the time the strands are written and assembled) is being given a historical origin in the deep past. For in fact, the early Hebrews lived amidst surrounding empires and city-states and small dynastic kingdoms, each with different gods, rituals, etc, and often quite violent conflicts. The Hebrews probably emerged from surrounding cultures and cohered by asserting their difference (we don't sacrifice children, we are circumcised, etc.) But the CHOSEN people claim is hugely important and disturbing. This sense/claim of EXCEPTIONALITY is taken up

by those who begin calling themselves “christians,” who claim to bear god’s blessing (which they say “the jews” forfeited - god has shifted HIS allegiance from them to us, these Christians say) -and who use this claim (we are the chosen people of the only god) to tyrannize over others cast as heathens and savages, to convert them and/or enslave them. The claim of exceptionality also migrates to versions of Islam. So we witness crusades and jihads in the name of a chosen people against infidels. Likewise, in North America, the claim to be the chosen people justifies imperial expansion across the continent, genocide, and slavery. The P strand, especially, insists on “normativizing” the TRUE/correct Hebrew, and demonizing the non-Hebrew, defining true heirs and outcasts. Mixing - intermarriage, but even worshiping other nearby gods or household fertility goddesses -is then seen as a gross betrayal deserving divine punishment and political correction. This is a powerful, perhaps inherently violent, maybe inherently immoral way of imagining community and identity, but it is also rampant across the world, and not only by way of abramite religions. You will see it play out in Exodus, in the revolutionary paradigm that the poets invent to represent the meaning of enslavement or oppression under empire, and to represent liberation, and the foundation/constitution of an alternative that lives by covenant.

IV. GETTING TO EXODUS

A. On the one hand, the god of genesis is a creator god, whereas the god of exodus is a god of politics, a god that intervenes into history, to fight on behalf of a people against an empire/state and its gods.) In some sense this Exodus god is a warrior god, who leads the Hebrews in battle, from slavery to freedom. In an important sense this political god defines justice as helping political friends -fellow slaves/citizens- and hurting political enemies -egyptian rulers and taskmasters, other empires, those who occupy the land being (re)claimed as ancestral right. This god brings a specific community out of slavery and into autonomous existence. This god may feel to you to be too ‘particularistic’ -not impersonal or universal, not an impartial umpire- but PARTISAN, thus un-godlike because you assume a god should be ‘above’ politics not in it.

B. But on the other hand, this god also writes the 10 commandments - at first the terms of the covenant with MY or THIS people - not THE moral law for ALL people. WE choose to live THIS way, by THESE rules. But once the prophets define this god as the only or true god, and define all other gods as false, as idols, then this law for us becomes THE law for all, and then the Hebrews become the people “chosen” to bring the MORAL LAW, morality itself, to all people. Exodus is written as if this later development (the law for all) was all along the purpose or meaning.

Exodus I

Readings

* The Book of Exodus 1-24/32-35
* The Book of Numbers 11-16
* Machiavelli, from The Prince (x)
* Jean-Jacques Rousseau, from The Social Contract (x)
* John Winthrop, Speech on Authority (x)
* Jonathan Boyarin, "Reading Exodus into History" (x)
* Carl Schmitt, Political Theology chaps 1 & 3
* Carl Schmitt, Concept of the Political excerpt

Recommended:

* B. Honig, "The Miracle of Metaphor" Diacritics vol 37#2 fall 07

Discussion Questions

1.What characterizes slavery? What freedoms are denied? In what regards are people 'enslaved'?

2. Exodus has been read as a text about liberation, and about the making of a "free" people. How is this accomplished? What dilemmas are involved? consider this story as a TEMPLATE of a broader revolutionary/emancipatory narrative.
*Is Moses like a Lenin, Mao or Mandella? Like a George Washington?
*How much blood must be shed? Does the Bible justify/authorize that violence? Why is violence depicted as necessary to found the law that forbids murder?
*What external and internal threats put "liberation" at risk?
*Could you re-describe popular resistance (-the bible calls it being "stiff-necked," but might it be defended against the judgment of Moses/god?)
*Consider the idea of "redemption" from Egypt: what does it require and mean? Is redemption a one-time event? an ongoing process never completed?

3. Assess god's authority: Is god a tyrant? Why? Or, has god failed as an authority when he is tyrannical? What constitutes authority as opposed to tyranny -or is there no difference? (no difference between Pharaoh and Moses?) Ask: what would characterize a "good" parent, teacher, leader - or god? How would they have to act? What capacities or dispositions or character must an 'authority' seek to foster in us if it is not to be 'tyrannical'? Or is all authority really tyranny?

4. Interpret the golden calf story: is it written from a parental point of view about "children" who won't grow up? The p.o.v. is not only parental but paternal: Moses is a father. The father rescues the children from dependence, childishness -from dependence on the mother? What might the "children" say on their behalf and how might they retell the story? Should Moses have responded differently to their idol-making? Or, do you want to affirm the point of view of Moses?

5. What is an idol and idolatry? Why must there be one abstract/invisible god? Think: the Greeks were polytheist: what differences follow?

6. By teaching the Hebrews to covenant -to make and keep promises- does god foster their freedom? How so? Is choosing to obey a promise (to remain faithful in a marriage, to keep a moral law, to uphold a constitution) the very sign of freedom? How so? Why not? (When people break a promise, do they betray themselves? Exercise &/or jeopardize their freedom? does the idea of "truancy" help?)

7. What has happened to God since Genesis? Has god become "ethical" (and violent) in new ways? become POLITICAL (and so historical) in new ways? What does it mean that God now gives people a fundamental law and creates a covenant to authorize it?

8. What do you think about the ten commandments? Do they make sense? Are they necessary? (Why?) What kind of community could emerge if people obeyed them?

Quotes for framing your thinking about Exodus:

"So wrong is it to confound independence with liberty. No one is less independent than a citizen in a free state." Tocqueville

"It is never freedom until you find something you really positively want to be. And people in America have always been shouting about what they are not. Unless of course they are millionaires, made or in the making...People are free when they are in a living homeland, not when straying and breaking away. People are free when they are obeying some deep inward voice of religious belief. Obeying from deep within. People are free when they belong to a living, organic believing community, active in fulfilling some...purpose. Not when they are escaping to some wild west. The most unfree souls go west and shout of freedom. The shout is a rattling of chains, always was. People are not free when they are doing just what they like...People are free only when they are doing what the deepest self likes. And there is some getti9ng down to the deepest self! It takes some diving...Liberty in America has so far meant breaking free of all dominion; the true liberty will begin only when Americans discover...the deepest whole self...not the self in idealistic halfness." D.H.Lawrence, from Studies in Classic American Literature

"If it is permissible to describe and define intellectually an emotional treasure as noble as freedom, then it may be said that to live like a soldier but not as a soldier, figuratively not literally...in short to live symbolically, that spells true freedom." Thomas Mann, from Felix Krull

"The ability to enlist the hope for redemption is the signature of the power that inspires voluntary submission." Jessica Benjamin, from The Bonds of Love

Karl Marx: "Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the

class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew." from The German Ideology

John Noble Wilford, in a New York Times "science" piece (sept. 4, 1990) wrote that there is a "growing consensus among Egyptologists, biblical scholars, and archaeologists that most of the early Israelites were Canaanites. Into their midst may have filtered some nomadic shepherds from east of Jordan and others who had fled Egypt...But they were mainly Canaanites who settled along the ridge running north from Hebron through Jerusalem far from the fortified city states to the west." The early Israelites emerged as a distinct community in the 13th and 14th centuries BC; they "coalesced out of Canaanite society, but these Canaanites did not want to live in cities and withdrew to the hill country." Wilford goes on, "No scholars today seriously believe the early Israelites came as conquerors. Some argue that they spit off from Canaan in a peasant revolt against the upper class, or escaped the overcrowded lowlands."

Letter Five: Exodus I

prefatory note - the exodus story is not historically accurate; it is unlikely that the Hebrew confederation was founded by an exodus of tribes from Egypt (see the passage quote above.) There is no evidence that Hebrews 'conquered' Canaan, but were likely Canaanite peasants, combining two local gods, and living amidst and surrounded by other tribes as well as several huge empires. The story is told by writers during and after the time of Solomon (e.g. in 600BCE) about a time around 1200 BCE - 600 hundred years earlier! It has strands that justify but that also de-legitimize both the monarchical priesthood and monarchy. the text itself bears the marks of a history that did indeed precede monarchy and priests and probably monotheism, all of which were later developments. The violence in the story -at first against backsliding Hebrews who worshiped the golden calf, and then against tribes already living in Canaan- is imagined, though there may well have been violence to found and to protect the initial confederation. Also, Moses is an imagined/invented figure, though such a leader may have existed when the confederation was formed. Imagine the founding narrative of 'the Greeks' through the Trojan War, a rich and old oral tradition finally redacted and written down by "Homer." I say this to emphasize the 'paradigmatic' sense of the story as setting up a kind of archetype, from 'slavery' to a promised land founded on covenant. It profoundly shaped Hebrew society and its development, not to mention the rest of European and American history. With rare exceptions, all canonical political theorists worked in relation to this archetype or myth and its constituent elements and dilemmas, and both the modern revolutionary tradition and settler colonialism are inconceivable without it

Exodus, George proposes, is a story dramatizing the PROBLEMS in trying to create a FREE people. God here changes from a god of creation to a god of history and politics, and thus becomes a law-giver and covenant-maker. If the trope guiding Genesis is rivalry between brothers, the trope guiding Exodus is the "stiff-neckedness" of a people who resist or reject or forget or violate or corrupt this covenant and the law it establishes. So the political theory in Exodus concerns covenant-making on the one hand, and stiff-neckedness on the other hand. Imagine god seeking our flourishing by teaching us to make covenants. Imagine god taking an enslaved people -who have never had to take responsibility for setting the terms of their lives, for supplying their own necessities and norms- and trying to turn them into a people who govern

themselves by meeting their own needs, setting the terms by which they rule (judge and regulate) themselves, and enforcing those terms. But the story does not really include the viewpoint of those cast as stiff-necked children. The story is written from, and to secure, a parental/paternal p.o.v. But, it can still be read 'infernally.' What is this text teaching about "politics"?

(A) The deepest teaching about politics in this story concerns authority -the relationship between authority and freedom. Authority is the faculty of gaining assent. We GIVE "authority" to something, like a god or a state, or a golden calf, a person. A state has power, but only by "assenting" to it does that power become authority. We ENDOW things with authority, it originates in us but becomes a property of the state or god. So gods, states, leaders, majorities, laws, -also core ideas, myths and stories- have "authority" because we still ASSENT to them. Their authority ends when and where assent ends. Gods, states, or stories can LOSE authority, and when they lose that, they also will lose their power, inevitably if not right away.

I should say right away that my account of the origin of authority is only partly true: after all, god or parents have "authority" in part because they precede and engender us -and it is our (sense of) subjection to them that indeed colors our relationship with every other authority from teachers to states, not only in the sense that we keep wanting to make an authority that will take care of us, but also in the sense that we always feel like any relation of authority is inherently a relation of subjection -but properly understood, as Winthrop argues, authority is a relation of mutuality, if not of complete equality)

Partly, exodus teaches that we always orient ourselves by authorities -parents, then peers, for example- and the question is not whether we orient by authority, but which: when does our assent enable our freedom? Certain authorities are enslaving, some are empowering. To endow kings with authority will imprison us: by endowing the wrong things with authority, we make idols and put ourselves in subjection. To endow god with authority, is to enhance our freedom. Why? Because this authority seeks our freedom, the argument goes. The argument is that god and Moses contrast with Pharaoh, and with the golden calf; the argument is that a good (or true) authority seeks or fosters your freedom, that is, creates a kind of reciprocity with you in dialogue, and seeks to foster your own capacity for self-regulation. That is a good teacher and parent, also a good leader, and I would say, a good god. But these figures can fail to elicit or sustain our assent. So partly, the bible shows how authority works (and fails) -violence always signals its failure, but it always fails.

Partly, Exodus is overlaying a psychological and developmental argument over a political argument. Children NEED parental authority. What do adults need? (They need to become their OWN authorities? To follow their conscience? Do adult citizens also need to respect the authority of majorities? Of their constitution or founding law? But how does the development from child to adult happen? How does it fail to happen? And what characterizes an "adult" relation to authority?) The fundamental lesson is: authority is inescapable, necessary, and problematic. Authority is necessary for our development into adults, constitutive of who we are because we take parental authority (and the moral law they teach) inside ourselves as part of our selves, but in this way we become our own authorities, ethical subjects and citizens, capable of criticizing, redefining, or rejecting the legacy (and the internalized law) bequeathed by parents & other worldly authorities. Exodus telescopes this process: it depicts the founding of a framework

that will constitute those who have consented to it. In what does the “authority’ of this framework consist? In our assent!! (Also in something true or real or good about WHAT we consent to? Consent itself does not suffice?)

So Exodus is partly about promising: rules, frameworks, or laws have authority when they are part of a covenant, when we have assented. God and Moses thus seek a people capable of living by covenants. Exodus telescopes the process of creating a people capable of living by promises, and the story dramatizes an argument about WHICH promises they should live by.

Many of us say that god would glorify himself by hardening Pharaoh’s heart, but ask: why does he need to do this? Not so much because he is insecure, simply speaking, but because he would lead a people who don’t know him, and he needs THEIR allegiance. He needs them to put their trust or faith in him, because only by FAITH can they leave Egypt and establish a different way of life. But what makes Pharaoh and god different? God wants people to covenant: god seeks not violent domination over people but seeks real authority in their eyes, which arises only from our genuine consent. God wants freely offered worship, a real covenant. A true authority must seek to foster the agency of those he claims to lead. That is what defines a good parent, a good teacher, a good leader, and a good god. (Or, what characterizes a good teacher-parent-leader? What criteria do you use to say?) So, when god uses violence, that means his authority has failed. That failure is not only ‘his’ fault, there is some kind of breakdown in the relationship -as we know in families, classrooms, etc. But at the core of the relationships is dialogue -complaining- which presumes respect and allows disagreement.

We always think of our freedom VERSUS any authority, as if freedom and authority were antithetical. But the bible teaches differently.

We always obey authority, the bible says: there is always a “god” so to speak, always something (an idea, a principle, a deep assumption, a faith, a leader) we invest our hopes of redemption in, always something we orient by or obey. Call them gods, call them myths, call them narratives, call them idols - we consent to them, orient by them. But when does allegiance trap or imprison or diminish us? When does allegiance enlarge us? The problem is not WHETHER we serve authority or make something authoritative for us, the question is WHICH. The biblical argument -from exodus to the prophets to jesus to Martin Luther King- is that certain kinds of authority trap us, and certain kinds free us: god or mammon, conscience or peers. Because I obey the authority of my god and conscience, King says, I can stand up to every worldly authority, but if I invest authority in kings, states, or nations, in peers or majorities, (or in money) I become a slave. The goal of Moses is a nation of prophets, he says, and therefore a people who are free. (The whole priestly thing is a later redaction: if there ever was a Moses, George proposes, he wanted a political community without kings and priests, ruled only by god and elected tribal elders -like the actual Hebrew confederation before kings were installed.) But a ‘nation of prophets’ -each accessing the voice of god - paradoxically requires a framework or constitution, whose authority enables our freedom as ethical agents and citizens committed to doing justly and seeking the good of the whole community. So at one level, the stories show people contesting the authority of rulers and leaders - from the moment when one Hebrew asks how Moses could even presume to intervene in their dispute, to the moment when Miriam says to Moses that God does not speak only through you. At another level, though, the story insists on the necessity of a

framework itself endowed with authority. But what kind of framework is that and where does its authority derive from? it must be constituted by promise, and open to revision, but also, by what promises to do what, and to prohibit what?

B. **The Exodus story thus teaches about politics, second, by teaching about the relationship between the authority of a framework (as constitution) and our freedom as actors, agents, creators.** the exodus story is about breaking away but also about making commitment, not just saying NO, but also about saying YES. It concerns liberation, the wilderness moment of emancipation also entails CHOSEN BONDS or covenant. The bible is describing freedom AS this act of founding a new order (by covenant), and the bible is describing the constitution of a community by the founding of first principles and by the forming of an identity. All life occurs within a horizon -how often do we actually see ourselves drawing the line between earth and sky? Exodus is about founding a way of life that requires ethical or moral individuality (that a person live by choosing between right and wrong/good and evil.) Freedom is depicted AS (a) liberation from oppression; (b) founding a new order; (c) promising to live by promising; and (d) moral life.

You may say, exodus is not democratic enough in its process or in the framework it establishes. We want genuine consent, truly free choice of the rules we live by, indeed, we must make rather than receive the law we live by, we must obey out of commitment only and never because of fear, and the covenant must be open to all and no one must be excluded. That is wonderful: are you re-playing Moses? calling for a second exodus? Remember, he was the one who said he wanted a nation of prophets, each animated by god's word. He did not want to mediate or monopolize "god," but to create a community in which people directly access and share that authority. What sort of people would we need to become to do that? How would we need to be transformed to be capable of living this way? What if some people don't want this responsibility or deny its possibility? How shall you demonstrate the benefits of this order -so demanding of participation and responsibility- to people who haven't experienced it and can't imagine it? But still, wont you draw on exodus ideas: an order founded in consent? an order that tries to a law that renounces violence altogether?

C. The exodus story teaches about politics, third, by teaching about the relationship between Law/morality and violence. Its teaching is partly psychological or developmental, and partly political.

Developmental: when the text calls the people stiff-necked it pathologizes their resistance, as if it were ONLY perverse, childish. The text speaks from a parental position in a parental voice. But the text also teaches that the law is ALWAYS "alien" and always in part imposed. Just think about your parents teaching you "morality": it feels alien at first, and in part it is, but as you take these rules inside and internalize them, "their" rules become your own law, and part of your (second) nature. Still, isn't there always a gap, even if we promise whole-heartedly? We are not unified within ourselves, we are divided subjects, never fully in harmony with the law, and the law remains always problematic even as it demands our assent. We are subjected to the law, even as that subjection is how we become self-regulating subjects.

Politically: the text dramatizes (argues by drama not by argument) that violence is necessary to found the very morality that prohibits violence: is there a tragic sense that morality is a political (and very costly) achievement? Law itself is seen as violent, and enforced by violence -and the violence may be necessary, and so, morally problematic. Morality is shown as a form of violence compelling people to take one form rather than another. And this "moral law" (OUR moral law) is established over opposition, by exclusion, domination and violence. It is not a pretty picture. But as with Genesis, the text shows us the REAL (bloody) meaning of morality and law (and of Hebrew origins) as problematic and costly achievements. No idealization -isn't that politically enabling?

D. Exodus teaches about politics by teaching a paradox, best stated by Rousseau: how can people be, before the law, what they can only be after and because of the law? That means we need to sustain a kind of tension in our view of what is going on. (A) On the one hand, go ahead and see god as a tyrant, but follow out the argument: god establishes "Thou Shalt" -an alien law- which elicits from the children -"I won't." So god is linked to the super-ego (the "over-I") that prohibits and punishes instinct and desire (the "id") Thou shalt vs. I won't: the voice of prohibition (supposedly linked to facing reality) vs the voice of the pleasure principle. The golden calf is regression to pleasure vs. an imposed law demanding renunciation and suffering in the name of growing up. To some degree that IS going on, right? But (B) on the other hand -if this has happened, aren't we at a sterile dead end? There is no ego, no I, only the parent vs the child, the law vs instinct, the leader vs. the mass, but no actual mediator of them. Is this really what god or Moses want? Rather, Moses says: can you will or consent to live this way? Yes, WE WILL, we say. Moses says if you CHOOSE this, it is linked to your DESIRE. AND, the law is to bring benefits and pleasures (though you can't see them yet) - The goal of the law is NOT to renounce desire, but to distinguish legitimate and illegitimate (just and unjust) ways of pursuing our desires. The goal is to meet our real material needs but not at the cost of others. That is justice. That is what god seeks. Moses imagines the covenant with god, and with each other, as a kind of (ideal) marriage, a promise animated by desire, a commitment that comes from the heart, so that people are joined but not in a repressive way but in a way that enables them to live "unmolested and unafraid each under his vine and fig tree." It is an image not of suffering and sacrifice but of well-being, flourishing. The text thus stipulates the conditions of flourishing -it teaches that flourishing has conditions, or rather that a just form of flourishing has conditions, so that some do not flourish at the expense of others. if ALL are to live 'under vine and figtree, unmolested and unafraid," what practices are necessary? Moses imagines a community in which people "love" the law that enjoins their reciprocity in meeting their needs.

E. To summarize: What is the story of exodus about?

(1) Exodus is about liberation from slavery & the founding of a new order (Like the American revolution and constitution.) It dramatizes freedom FROM but also freedom TO; both the no and the yes. It dramatizes what it means to REFUSE a regime/world and to FOUND a new regime or new world, to CONSTITUTE a political community in acts of "FOUNDATION." It foretells how a founding framework -of laws and stories- is internalized, so that the law or a set of norms become 'second nature.' but here the specific goal is that people who internalize THIS law, which demands their promise-keeping and accountability, thereby become self-regulating or self-governing citizens. in the language of contemporary critical theory they become "subjects"

by being "subjected" to this law; their capacity for self-regulation comes out of their subjection. As they internalize these rules, they develop capacities for critical judgment that also make them capable of criticizing and modifying this framework. they develop an idea of JUSTICE that they CAN turn against "the law" because their shaping enables them to say that a law is called just is not really just, and they can argue why. I am trying to emphasize here the dynamic relation between the constitutional covenant as a 'form' and the energies it at once contains, shapes, and enables, which can revise the form and thereby make it a-new.

(2) Exodus is about the establishment of "MORALITY" (as a "law of laws") and its internalization, which establishes CONSCIENCE, an internal standard. It dramatizes how human beings develop capacities for "self-discipline, self-surveillance, and self-regulation," as Nietzsche says. To internalize the law and establish "conscience" is to create a "subject" who CAN make and keep promises, who can project a future and has the discipline to make good on it, who is capable of self-overcoming. Exodus is about the founding of a self-governing political community AND of a self-governing ethical subject, at once. It is this idealized self-governing subject that is at the core of what is now called humanism, and this subject is both imagined and produced in typically race-d and gender-ed terms - i.e. in relation to others defined as lacking this capacity for self-regulation - because they are wild, savage, undisciplined, irrational, emotional, idolatrous etc. To 'fail' at self-regulation is to 'regress' or 'back-slide' -to become like them. But such 'others' are also incredibly attractive to those who are burdened by this subjectivity - they seem freer -spontaneous, instinctual, 'natural'- precisely because they are not 'chosen' for this discipline. Self-sacrificial subjection on the one hand, and contempt, envy, and violence on the other hand, are built into this subjectivity. We thus see the problem of membership and exclusion - how are these others understood -are they simply different, or is their difference threatening? Is their form of life represented as different, and valid, but we choose otherwise? Is their form of a life a temptation we cannot endure and must kill off? but what is the danger?

F. Supplemental readings: excerpts from Machiavelli, Winthrop, Rousseau about: (1) the issue of founding and (2) the meaning of authority

(1) One of the central dilemmas in political theory is that no founding is legitimate in its own terms, because legitimacy always derives from some recognized -prior- authority (standard or law or institution or practice) and any new founding -e.g. Moses or the American Revolution- is by definition extra-legal, breaking precedents. If you say, the source of legitimacy is "the people" - what brings "the people" as a consenting body into existence? It does not really precede the act of founding because it does not cohere as a people except by founding; 'the people,' paradoxically, follows from founding. As Rousseau puts it, if we were to take consent seriously, the people must already be "before the law" what they can become only by living under it. Here is the central paradox of democratic legitimacy -there is always a gap, and it can be huge. How do leaders and founders, therefore, justify doing the unprecedented? Machiavelli and Rousseau say founders call on "gods" - and Machiavelli also says they must use violence -and he claims that "unarmed prophets" always fail. So there is not only a paradoxical question of how to justify founding, but also the moral/political question of how to achieve it. Machiavelli points to Moses and insists on the necessity of armed prophets. For Machiavelli and Rousseau both, the paradox of founding can be finessed by a 'great' leader -both draw on the image of Moses to depict the

"legislator" who founds the fundamental law, but then is not part of the community (So, Moses cannot enter the promised land.) but how do you know who is a charlatan - a false prophet- and who to really trust and follow?

(2) What distinguishes a "good" leader? (Or parent, teacher, and god?) In his great speech, Winthrop argues that "true" authority is characterized by its "end" or goal, which he says is liberty -a true authority, he argues, must seek the freedom of those subject to it. Otherwise, he says, it is not authority but a "distemper thereof" -i.e. tyranny. Examples of a "true" authority, therefore, must work in some kind of reciprocity (though not simple equality) with its audience and subjects. Otherwise we witness mere coercion or domination, not authority. So consider when/how God, Moses or Aaron "fail" as authorities. To quote Rousseau again, are there moments when gods/leaders/parents must "force people to be free"? Or are such arguments dangerous to any "democratic" way of thinking -which must see ANY kind of authority -ANY investment of legitimacy, whether in a person or institution, as a way to disguise or justify power. From this point of view, "authority" is always at least in part external, alien, coercive, and we need to remember this. "Hegemony" is power made legitimate, and democracy requires unmasking it. So any form of reverence - for constitutions, laws, priests, churches, parents - needs to be (con)tested, not allowed to congeal as mere piety. As Adam Phillips argued, we need to see both the necessity of rule (and the necessity of endowing them with authority) AND we need to see the value of truancy that tests, modifies, or escapes them.

G. What <u>problems</u> does the story dramatize? Take these problems into Deuteronomy:

Problem #1: the successor generation In the American case, the first generation of those who called themselves "the children of the founders" lamented that they could not initiate the law or found the order they live by; they felt diminished compared to the generative power of the founders. An order they merely inherited seemed imprisoning: the founders created the order but we must live within it. The founders knew both 'slavery in Egypt' and "the wilderness" -what is outside the order- but we are trapped. We remain children always, though we are adults. This is the key concern in Moses's Deuteronomy speech: Imagine he is addressing those who did NOT grow up in slavery, who were NOT adults at Sinai - all those adults died off after 40 years in the wilderness. How can this second generation be attached to the order their parents purportedly consented to? In what does 'consent' of the second generation consist? What is the "answer" to this problem of the successor generations, whose freedom seems diminished by the impossibility of themselves being founders? In a nutshell, the answer is "July 4th," taken seriously:
* Remember you were slaves in Egypt;
* Re-enact (remember) the exodus and Sinai every year, indeed, every day, and see yourself in it;
* teach covenant-renewal: this framework is a condition of possibility, it has value as the basis of our present capacity to be critical and creative; but also, we must "re-found" the framework by our own action now. A "free" people lives by renewing or making a-new their first principles and their commitments to practice these principles.
* A free people live by continuously re-founding the order, as they continually re-interpret their first principles. We re-interpret first principles because they are neither fixed nor self-evident, but rather, we keep them alive as we infuse them with new meaning.

Problem #2: revision and refounding In America we argue about the constitution as a written document, but also about the meaning of the declaration of independence. Lincoln used the Declaration to justify a profound revision of the constitution (to break its connection to slavery.) But we REVISE our founding Law, partly by arguing about its true meaning, partly by asking about our needs now. We make amendments, we invent new rights. often by extra-legal action undertaken by social movements. How does revision and amendment happen in the bible? There is no EXPLICIT provision for revising the 10 commandments. Moses even insists that not a single rule can be changed. There is no sense that they could revise what they think God is or justice requires. BUT in subsequent books of the Bible you hear prophets and then Jesus asking: how are we to interpret those 10 commandments - what is really required of us? What does god really require of us? I.e. what conduct is really just? also, has our idea of god changed if our idea of justice has changed? Do we modify what we imagine as the expectations and demands of our god? Is the real MEANING of our promise to love god or obey the law at odds with the way we now practice it? Is there a gap between the "spirit of the law" and the "letter of the law" as we implement specific laws? Is there a gap between "first principles" and how we practice them? Moreover, what is the right disposition toward the law, toward transgression, and so toward punishment? There is enormous room for rival interpretations and intense argument -as MacIntyre argued.

Problem #3: exclusion and violence!! (Note the parallels: Anglo-Europeans beginning with Puritans commit genocide to found an America called a redeemer nation and chosen people, and they believe they are following a biblical model. When the Puritan John Winthrop speaks on the Arabella before landing in Massachusetts, he quotes Moses from Deuteronomy, and he follows Moses in justifying war with the peoples already living there.) Why not peaceful co-existence?
* Why must the people live ONLY by this ONE god? Why not polytheism like everyone else? Why not a pantheon in which Yahweh is first but not alone? Why not cosmopolitan mixing with other cultures? Why not a celebration of being hybrid (the actual historical reality) rather than the insistence on purity?
* Why do they imagine a god that so fears tribes with different gods and ways of life? what is so tempting about their 'idolatry'? And why respond to that temptation by violence?
* The idea of one god, one law, one RIGHT way to live seems to entail, (to push the text toward) violence because we must stay pure, entirely uncontaminated by any other way of life or identity. We do not face worthy alternative ways of life that we choose to forgo; rather, we live the one right way, the alternatives are wholly bad, and there is no loss for us in forgoing these other ways of living. Is this an unfair interpretation of what is going on in the text?

Letter Six: Exodus II (from Rousseau to Schmitt)

I.What is the Bible teaching about "politics"?

A. Genesis

1. Genesis means beginning, beginning means creation, initiation, inauguration. Genesis makes beginning, creation of the world through speech, exodus (from the garden, Ur, egypt). Beginning also rupture (beginning often is or feels criminal) Be with Abraham: let yourself feel the guilt at leaving, the risk of failure, the terror of not knowing, the thrill of adventure, the ambivalence of change. Be with Moses, imagine mobilizing novos ordo seculum - a new order, imagine taking delight in what you create, in declaring it good. Genesis signals why Shelley calls poets the great "legislators" of human life, greater than actual law-givers because their visions really precede and "constitute" what actors see, say, do. See the power and possibility in the poetry.

2. Genesis is also a "political" text because it asks: what is the (worldly, social, cosmic) context of human agency? To ask about context is to ask a political question: what are our circumstances, what are the forces we DO NOT control (or even understand)? What is it within our power to do? Who is "we"? (Machiavelli invents "fortuna" to suggest these questions and one element of an answer. the Hebrew poets propose "god" and tell the Eden story for the same reason -to name what conditions our action and choices.

3. Genesis is a political text because it introduces the idea of covenant, and posits the fundamental ethical question: am I my brother's keeper? The ethical answer is, yes, absolutely, you are absolutely responsible to respond to (the suffering of) every other. But at the same time, Genesis also introduces a political response to Cain's question by asking more questions about responsibility: which others? responsible in what regards? How are we to respond to their needs? to their inhospitality or violence? (Should we emulate God's response to Cain or to Sodom?) Is there a distinction between our obligations to friends/members, and to others?

B. Exodus is a revolutionary paradigm of leaving and overthrowing, of initiating and creating, of committing and founding. These are the foundational political acts that bring forth the unprecedented. But politics also means framing human agency. We spent 2 weeks talking about exodus, the foundational story in the west for thinking about the origin and foundation of political community, and for thinking about revolution. A story of before (slavery), wilderness (the liminal in-between) and redemption (the promised land) is problematic narrative in itself - because it posits the very idea of complete redemption from oppression or domination, as if human beings could ever really leave the past totally behind, become totally different, and get beyond antagonism and conflict. And the very hope for that harmonious condition (a promised land, a new Eden) can justify terrible violence. Yet this story animated real politics -the Puritan experiment, American revolution, settler colonial genocide, and yet also the civil rights movement. Beginning as making a commitment or covenant, and covenant as holding people together by consent, are strongly democratic elements, though the idea of perfectly consensual change is continually disappointed or defeated, as if to always show that consent can never be wholly separated from power, or law from violence. Still, the question Exodus asks is how does change happen? How do we think about (and so narrate) systemic (revolutionary) change?

C. Theorists conceive the meaning or essence of politics very differently, but those visions are present in the Exodus story:

* Hannah Arendt says the essence of "the political" is "action in concert" and that "the political" occurs wherever such action occurs, and she associates action with NATALITY - with the capacity to begin, initiate, and create that she aligns with the miraculous.
* Max Weber says the essence of the political, unlike any other human practice, is dealing with violence and the political occurs at the site of the state;
* Sheldon Wolin says defines the political as concerning the whole: a "political" moment is when people speak or act in ways that recover their commonality and address the fate of the whole;
* Aristotle defines the political as the speech and action in public by citizens engaged in judgment of what is just and unjust, advantageous and harmful;
* Rousseau says the political is the act of making community by acts of choice and commitment -to form a general will by a social contract.
* for the revolutionary left the political is "constituent power" that founds or refounds a regime
* Schmitt also claims to identify the essence of "politics" or "the political," as if it were a noun and we could state its essence, its "form" in Plato's sense. Whereas the essence of morality, of what we call specifically "moral" activity, is making distinctions between good and evil, he says, distinctive essence of the activity we call politics is distinguishing between friends and enemies.
* Some theorists thus identify "the political" with the state, others with action and speech independent of the state. All contrast the political to the merely private. All emphasize that politics involves collective life. All see "politics" as fate-ful decisions shaping a collective fate. None see any guarantee that our action and choice will turn out well. Living with that contingency close up, acting into the unknown and making uncertain judgments, but bearing responsibility for any results, makes politics a distinctive and ennobling activity.

In contrast, our society says "politician" as an epithet. We want to be left alone, in private life, as individuals. We define freedom as both private and individual, not involving others, indeed diminished by the presence of others. Making commitments that bind us seems not an act of freedom but subjection to slavery. We want to be defined only by our personal acts in private, and we do not want to be held accountable for what our community does in our name. Freedom means doing what I want when I want. Hobbes and Locke taught us to call that "natural liberty" which we have to sacrifice to some degree because we "must" live with others and because we need some protection from them through the state. It is this idea of freedom that the Bible, from exodus through prophecy - and that every theorist of politics - rejects, and must reject.

II. Focus on Schmitt: How do his theories relate to the biblical texts?

A. In Political Theology, the distinctive act of politics is declaring the exception: "sovereign is he who declares the exception." What is an exception? He says it is analogous to a miracle, and a miracle is an interruption in the natural order, in the causal order of natural or human law. In liberalism we say: we live by LAW not by MEN. We say: interpret don't make the law. We try to erase the human element of willfulness, discretion, and decision -of creativity- in life by saying we are going to live by the rules, and by applying them in an "objective" manner. We try to create order and diminish anxiety by binding ourselves to rule-bound institutions, call them bureaucracies. We keep hoping that experts can tell us what to do. We imagine objective knowledge, we imagine non-partisan managers, who will run our lives for us (so we can be left alone, we say.) Schmitt is writing against these aspects of the "liberalism" he identifies with legal procedure (as if it were automatic) and with the economic rationality of markets, by recovering

what they evade: the political is the constitutive moment before the law, beneath it or outside it, the moment of power and creativity that creates it. It is when Moses declares a state of exception, denying sovereignty to Pharaoh and claiming it for God. It is extra-legal, and foundational, and one sovereign is replaced by another -though we see Moses and God struggle to actually make good on their claim. To declare an exception is to go behind the law to the human creativity and action that brought it into being. It is to face the fact that every institution (including law and markets) originates in human willfulness. To declare an exception is to enter the extra-legal (revolutionary or political) realm. To make an interruption is to assert human freedom and creativity. Moses declares an exception in Egypt to create an exodus. The democratic interpretation of Schmitt is that this fundamental power, to declare an exception, rests with the people as sovereign, for Schmitt focuses sovereignty on and in the state. "sovereign" is whoever takes that constituent/founding power by declaring the necessity of going outside the law. That is the truly "political" -foundational- moment -the rest is police. "Politics" is that constitutive moment that opens a space, a rupture, to act otherwise. To step outside the law is terrifying, but how else to start a new order or make a significant innovation? By focusing on the exception rather than the rule, therefore, Schmitt is trying to recover, make visible: the constitutive power of human beings to create/establish/found; the inaugural creative power of human beings to begin a new series; human decision itself -to say no, to say yes, to live otherwise.

Notice that the exception is <u>declared</u> -the declaration is our life in speech- an exception is not proven, we have to judge a claim to exception, and we have to DECIDE who we listen to, whether we accept their claim or refuse it. Cases can be made, but at bottom, there is a leap. There is no doubt that tyrants and demagogues exemplify the DANGER in this language: they seek sovereignty by declaring an exception, and people give them that authority, just as people GAVE Moses an authority (to speak to god) that they COULD have retained themselves.

Hold onto the idea that we have it in our power to begin the world over again, as Tom Paine put it, for that is the fundamentally democratic and revolutionary idea in Schmitt's idea of exception, however he wants to use it. Against every idea of impersonal or automatic process or of someone who has objective knowledge, hold onto the HUMAN elements of discretion and decision, don't let go of popular forms of power; accept the inevitability of conflict. But at the same time, note how Schmitt wants to secure and fix sovereignty in the state, not in a democratic process.

B. <u>Concept of the Political</u>
an institution becomes "political" when it articulates an adversary by at the same time articulating its own animating principle. We do not achieve "political" existence until and unless we define a border of difference and see potential antagonism. For Schmitt when we define "enemy" we are defining what "existentially" threatens a "way of life." I think he means something like this: not we live by the truth and you live by lies; not we are human and you are not; rather, we live by our god and you live by your god, but our god and your god are in potential conflict because they entails different forms of life. If we don't live by our god, we will live by your god, and we no longer exist as a particular community. We lose our identity. He is not saying that the enemy is immoral, or ugly, or monstrous. The enemy is not a foe, not personal, but a political adversary. Indeed, if we see the particularity of OUR way, we can respect that these other folks are also human, living by another particular way of life. If we give up the universality in the idea that there is ONLY ONE RIGHT way to live (as opposed to the

idea that the way we live is right for us) then we are left with different communities living by different ways of life, that may be incompatible but no one is inhuman. So declaring an "enemy" is not demonizing another, not even disliking or hating another, but declaring a difference, a distinction, that is life-defining and that may be a source of conflict. To make the enemy inhuman is to avoid the politics he wants to emphasize - we say they are inhuman rather than say we are making decisions over different ways to live. Then we can also justify killing them. For Schmitt, in contrast, there is no moral grounds for killing another human being, there is no "just war." Sacrificing the self or killing the other can be justified only on "existential" grounds of protecting a way of life. Machiavelli says: I love my city more than my soul. It is immoral to kill, always. Imagine Schmitt more interested in self-sacrifice and not in killing. He imagines that a "political" moment is when you are willing to sacrifice your life for something greater than it.

What is an example of this? When abolitionists oppose slavery as a system, they do not hate slave-owners personally, but slavery is the "enemy." When colonial subjects resist subordination, the colonizer is the enemy. When workers oppose capitalism and fight over how the society's economic surplus is spent, they declare capital the enemy. In health insurance argument, are insurance companies the enemy? Anarchists protest global capital as the enemy. We are not talking about nation-nation conflict only. We are talking about deep conflicts over practices between organized constituencies. I don't mean to trivialize Schmitt. I think he is emphasizing that conflict is inescapable, and we ourselves have to decide which differences matter to us, and when they reach a point of serious or profound antagonism. We want to believe that we can escape such distinctions between friend and enemy, as if to escape conflict between constituencies supporting different core principles. But for Schmitt the moment of political decision about identity, about what we value, is the highest and most noble moment. It is the moment when people discover who they really are, what they stand for; in this moment life gains weight and meaning, and people can go beyond themselves. They go from mere life to what Aristotle calls the good life. If we value agreement and harmony at all costs, do we give up the question -the most important question - of what is the right and best life? Must we devalue that question to create harmony? Schmitt believes that question generates different answers and therefore also generates the possibility of conflict. To avoid that conflict we must avoid that question, but that is the only question that makes life worthwhile. For him the seriousness of life is at stake in his defense of "the political" as a moment of definition and commitment.

C. Do Exodus or Deuteronomy exemplify Schmitt's argument?

Are there people living by different gods? Is their way of life (as an EMPIRE) incompatible with our (EGALITARIAN/DEMOCRATIC) way of life?

To declare our allegiance to OUR god, who wants us to live by covenants, and to see how OTHER gods demand mere obedience, is to declare at once an organizing faith and its political adversary, to declare both a positive and a negative. Then we are defining "friend" and "enemy" in a "Schmittian" sense. (But our covenant also requires us to welcome "aliens and strangers," and, we may not agree with our 'friends' in every regard.) When the text says we MUST KILL the other, we are rightly horrified. Every great talmudic scholar has been horrified and struggled against these passages. But at the same time, we need to recognize that we cannot escape the PROBLEM of making distinctions and judgments, of seeing and addressing real/deep conflict.

D. Honig on Schmitt

Honig offers a consistent and profound and appealing critique of Schmitt, which is why I assigned her essay. Notice that she says the task is not to try to "escape" theology but to create a counter-theology. That means rethinking Schmitt's view of sovereignty, decision, exception, miracle, and identity.

1. contra Schmitt, she argues that sovereignty is an assemblage - fraught, fragile, contested, divided - as different figures try to interpellate people and interpret circumstances - so god, moses, and the people are in ongoing engagement about sovereignty -who has it and what it means. Maybe Schmitt is too focused on sovereignty as unitary and absolute -maybe the goal is to break down that idea, on the model of american federalism. Maybe the idea is not to establish a single Leviathan, but a confederation of states? Maybe Schmitt is too state-centered because he links sovereignty to the state too much. Instead he should be more outspoken that sovereignty ultimately rests in the people, that democratic sovereignty, in the people, is key.

2. She argues that the bible in fact includes the idea that sovereignty ultimately rests in the people, and the question is: how do they perceive, receive and respond to declarations of exception? -Accordingly, the bible depicts the people CHOOSING to give up their sovereignty to MOSES - you go talk to god, they say, we are scared. They COULD have met with God. They COULD have been the VOICE of god. They ceded that (prophetic) power to Moses. They COULD reclaim it. Likewise, later, they say, give us a KING. Moses is ambivalent -sometimes he WANTS people to be (like) prophets and then sometimes (against Miriam) he insists only he can speak god's voice. Sovereignty is an issue, contested, and not only is there conflict about it, but we are each, internally, ambivalent about claiming it.

3. Contra Schmitt, she argues the bible includes the idea that the relation to god and the law is not a simple either/or dichotomy of obey or resist, but rather an ongoing "iteration" -that is, ways of (re)interpreting what god wants, what the law means. So there is not rule OR exception, but ongoing acts of interpretation. Schmitt dichotomizes rule and exception, as if following a rule were really "mechanical" so that only way to get human agency and creativity and decision into a impersonal legal or constitutional process is to RUPTURE it, to BREAK THE RULE. Either obey or Rebel. But whatif there is agency precisely in the interpreting and application of rules? Then the whole idea that human freedom exists only in that moment of rupture is mistaken. Then discretionary moments of choice and action are PART of the ordinary, not an extra-ordinary moment (or "exception") that overwhelms the ordinary. Then "miracles" are happening all the time. We need to SEE discretion and choice in EVERY moment in our relation to rules, rather than see our agency only as taking exception to rule.

4. Miracles are part of life, but not self-evident and require interpretation. Our relation with god and miracles is more like an encounter
the true miracle is not god's sovereignty, but neighbor love and creativity.
we need to be prepared to receive such miracles, prepared to interpret them rightly and take them into our lives. Ritual is good because it orients us toward the appearance of miracles in life

5. But the same dilemmas apply as in Schmitt's argument about sovereignty and exception: Who should we listen to? To which voice do we endow authority: Moses, Aaron or Miriam? Should we interpret our murmuring as irresponsibility (as Moses argues) or as a valid resistance to unjust authority (as Miriam implies)? Should we be claiming or ceding sovereignty? When is there a crisis? When is someone crisis-mongering? When is our republic truly in danger? In what consists that danger? These ARE fundamental political questions, and Honig says there are no self-evidently correct answers.

6. Schmitt imagines "friend" in too homogenizing a way. He imagines faith creating a unified community, against another unified community organized by a different animating principle. He celebrates that moment of consolidation. I would say, contra Schmitt, that there is a lot to be said for seeing encounters with difference as an occasion to QUESTION or COMPLICATE or CONFOUND my faith and my community. Schmitt never talks about that self-reflective, self-critical moment, only about the declaration and affirmation. We need to see the adversarial dimension in life, where people have deep conflicts, but we also need to use those conflicts to provoke self-reflection -and discussion, which he also devalues. We need to see how what we call the enemy is always-already part of us.

7. Schmitt wants moments of commitment, and wants us to accept that there can be a plurality of such faiths, potentially in conflict. He wants to bring into our life that sense of choice, commitment, and risk - he wants the adversarial as a way to intensify our sense of collective identity. He wants to say that the RISK of conflict is the central aspect of politics because politics involves intense and antithetical group identifications and commitments. We want to imagine a world that reconciles adversaries, to create friends, no enemies. I share that wish. We like it when MLK talks of "love" as a way to negotiate difference, as if "love" is a way to come to terms with (recognize and accept) our differences without violence. We want to keep drawing the circle wider, to enfold difference within the warm embrace of "humanity." We want to pluralize and defuse whereas Schmitt wants to polarize and intensify attachment. On the one hand, are there moments when adversarial politics is necessary? (Do prophets typify such moments?) On the other hand, is the fundamental political act not the stipulation of friend/enemy, but the engagement across lines of difference?

Exodus II: Deuteronomy

Readings

* The Book of Deuteronomy 1-12, 28-34
* Harry Berger, “The Lie of the Land” (x)
* Ernst Renan, “What is a Nation?”(x)
* Hannah Arendt, “Collective Responsibility”(x)
* Abraham Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address” (x)

Discussion Questions for Deuteronomy

1. Moses demands remembrance-of what? Why is memory so important? (Why is forgetting -and of what- so likely?) How does Moses compare to Renan?

2. Moses wants the law to be taken inside, into the heart, loved joyfully. Why? If people did this, what would result? (What does it mean to “circumcise the heart”?) Does such love change the meaning of obedience -you exercise, not sacrifice autonomy? Or is willful embrace still troubling submission?

3. Moses seeks a nation of prophets who love the law, which means forgoing idols and other ways of life. Why? What is the threat? Why not allow people to worship multiple gods, to privatize worship or practice various ways of life? (Before the civil war, Stephen Douglass argued that every state should be free to decide to allow slavery or not, as if this is the meaning of ‘popular sovereignty’ in democracy, whereas Lincoln argued that democracy prohibited that choice, i.e. if we worship equality, then...Is this analogous?)

4. Why is Moses so anxious about neighbors who worship other gods (or idols, who live differently? Why are these other ways so tempting/threatening to Hebrews? (This is the outside-facing version of the question: why not allow multiple gods among the Hebrews - why not pluralize and privatize worship?)

5. Moses establishes the idea of collective liability - no one is exempt from the fate of the community -the “innocent” will suffer for what the “guilty” do. Each of us and all of us are responsible for the conduct of each and all. act. Is this tyrannical or unjust? Is this a vision of democracy -as citizens take responsibility for the consequences of their acts? Compare Moses to Arendt writing about post-Nazi Germany, or about American citizens in regards to the Vietnam War, racial injustice, or slavery. Who is responsible? Who is to be held responsible? What does it mean to “take responsibility” as a community or collective subject? (Consider Arendt’s distinction between “guilt” for what you yourself have done, and “responsibility” for what you have not personally done but inherit by virtue of membership, or incur by virtue of a state acting in your name.)

6. Moses promises terrible curses if the people fail to obey their covenant. Why? Is he trying to scare people into obedience -you will be punished by god? Or, if the law is linked to doing justly by taking others into account and assuming collective responsibility for the good of all, are there consequences to giving up that law and the justice it entails? Such as?

7. If you are scripted as the children of founders, as inheriting the covenant and law THEY made at Sinai, how (in what senses or ways) can YOU be free? Are you trapped by their commitments? How does Moses address this issue?

8. Hebrews are sons/children in a family in which god is father: what does this familial/gendered metaphor suggest?

9. Assess the idea of a "chosen people." Moses insists Hebrews are not chosen because of merit. Then what does this claim mean? Is it immoral to put one people over all others? Do they place themselves under a special obligation?

Letter Seven: Exodus III - Deuteronomy

recall the broad outlines of the interpretation I have offered in the last two classes: exodus and deuteronomy are texts of political theory or theology, in the sense that they telescope and dramatize the fundamental issues of community-making or nation-building. You read Machiavelli and Rousseau with Exodus, to propose the idea of initiating 'a new order of things' as Machiavelli put it, which involves the problem of violence (only 'armed prophets' can succeed, he says, invoking Moses) but partly because, as Rousseau asks, "how can people be, before the law, what they can only become by way of the law?" What does making an exodus from egypt entail? How do people liberate themselves FROM slavery? What are the external and internal obstacles? How do they transform themselves into a 'free people'? I have offered an interpretation that says the texts do not idealize this revolutionary vision but show every morally problematic aspect, the violence and threats of punishment, the imperfections of leaders, the ambivalence of people. The text is narrated from a parental and paternal perspective, casting the people as children who need to be educated and disciplined -who need to be 'made' into 'adults' who can make and keep their promises, who can and do hold each other to account for their conduct. The text assumes humans are not 'naturally' such subjects, and SHOWS that this is a huge, bloody, costly, and yet worthy achievement. The text not only establishes the commandments and law that will be equated with morality itself -showing the violence involved in establishing rules against violence- but also establishes a 'moral' subject who has internalized a law as conscience, and lives accordingly. (Winthrop - not about the 'negative' liberty of 'doing whatever one wants,' e.g. sex, drugs, and rock&roll- but about a 'positive' freedom involving commitment to live by what we will come to call the golden rule. From 'natural' liberty -as golden calf - to 'moral and civic freedom.")But whereas Christianity typically focused this subject on its interior life, the state of its soul and its redemption by a personal god, these texts create political beings, citizens who exercise "collective responsibility" as Arendt puts it, taking responsibility for (judging) each other's conduct, upholding the fundamental covenant (constitution and first principles) that constitute them a community. They are "collectively liable" for what each other do. So there is not a clearly defined space of private rights but rather the sense that no act is indifferent in its worldly implications. This is not liberal individualism -in which the goal of the state is to protect your 'private rights'- but an intensely communal commitment to creating and sustaining a common justice and solidarity in a harsh, violent world of empires that worship rulers as gods and impose gross inequality and exploitation.

BUT, against this parental/paternal story, which renders any popular resistance as 'stiff-necked' or regressive or selfish, I would defend the people's ambivalence and resistance, their suspicion of authority, their concern for immediate physical needs, the desire for pleasure. I would also protest the violence the text makes righteous and justified. I propose using Adam Phillip's idea of 'truancy' to avoid the dead-end of interpretations which posit either compliant (fearful) submission or enraged defiance. Imagine retelling the literal story in ways that see tensions -between god/Moses & the people, also between the demand of law/rules/covenant, and,

our rebellious, critical, experimental agency- and makes these tensions generative. In ways you may find incredible, I use the text to imagine a much more agonistic relation between law and people, between the covenant, principles, and rules that we inherit and our capacity to revise and amend that inheritance, between factions of a community who interpret law & legacy one way and factions interpreting it otherwise, such that communities can really divide over interpretation, fall into crisis, and fail.

I am struck by the consistency of your responses and questions: you felt like you were being enlisted, coerced, or interpellated into imprisonment: your words were constricted, intimidated, coerced, manipulated, overwhelmed -and you resisted. You asked:

1) Are the Hebrews trapped, forced to covenant, unable to really choose or exit? (If there is fear or threats is any choice genuine?)

2) How can Moses or God call for LOVE to maintain fidelity to the covenant, and yet rely on THREATS and FEAR?

3) The text says god wants people to love the law and 'circumcise their heart,' and you say god wants obedient submission? What/why the difference?

4)How can god be jealous/punishing AND merciful? Aren't they contradictory? shouldn't god's love be unconditional?

5) God is an abusive parent or spouse, who gaslights his people by depicting fearful compliance as "love".

6) How can the bible prohibit murder, yet endorse killing? (What could possibly justify violence against other tribes?) How can the text say you must give refuge to the alien, but also say, you must fear (and kill) the other?

7) why can't the Hebrews just live with other peoples who have different gods?
Why not tolerate other gods? Why be judgmental and exclusive? Why not mix with these gods and peoples? Why ONLY this god, this way? What's wrong with mixing? Why insist on rigid boundaries?

8) How could a just god possibly 'choose' ONE people as special rather than love all people(s)? Is this god not universal only particular?

I credit your sense of shock or outrage -it is reflective of the text, it is your experience of the text. God endorses violence against other tribes and threatens Hebrews with destruction, even though

commandments say don't kill, give refuge to the alien, and trust in my mercy. Moses does use fear and threats as if to compel obedience, even as he calls for people to "love" the law -i.e. to love JUSTICE inwardly, by "circumcising the heart" as it were inwardly -but Moses never says that justice and the law might be different. The text endorses cruel punishments for Hebrew promise-breaking, endorses ethnic cleansing of others to a genocidal degree, and promotes subjects who will live in constant fear of punishment for transgression. In trying to respond to you, I run the risk of defending what you see as an abusive god, of gaslighting as 'covenant' and love what you see as tyranny and submission.

1A) So the first issue is the reading. Exodus and Deuteronomy are susceptible to opposed readings -i.e. liberation from oppression or imperial conquest, genuine covenant-making by choice or coercion. Likewise, the "murmuring" of the people against god and Moses can be read as a sign of irresponsibility or as a sign of their worldly, immediate, practical concerns about food and safety. Popular murmurings may also be seen as a sign of popular prophecy that the redactors are as anxious as Moses to repress -e.g. in the case of Miriam- yet Moses also says he imagines god speaking in others and calls for a nation of prophets. At every point the text is contradictory, and, susceptible to rival readings. How shall you respond as readers? When you see a contradiction Ask: what is the problem to which the text gives two different answers? (E.g. love and fear -why are BOTH here? What is the problem the text addresses in contradictory ways? Contradictions are not a FAULT but a window: why are they here? Great theory is characterized by contradiction, not consistency. Contradictions show where the text/theorist addresses something contradictory in the world. Contradictions are the point where the text is teaching the most about a problematic or paradoxical feature of the world. Imagine contradiction as a tension and dialogue IN the Bible, and include that tension and dialogue in your ACCOUNT of it. Don't be as mono-logical as the god you criticize :) You complain that god is too dichotomous, but I hear a lot of dichotomy in your critiques -either pure consent or tyranny, either pure love or coercion, etc. Imagine Blake's "contraries" instead?

1B) You tend to assume that the Hebrews are already self-regulating subjects, just like you, who already embody responsibility and accountability for choices, and who already believe in consent as the only legitimate basis for any relation or practice. I would say: you are presuming the very kind of subject and principle that the text is establishing. You believe that the idea of covenant (as consent to a rule) is the only basis for social relations or relations with god -and anything less that full consent means tyranny, is illegitimate. But where do such assumptions originate? I think you are the heirs, the children of Moses -you would radicalize that idea of covenant, you would jettison the elements of fear and reward that the text foregrounds, you would focus on the voluntary, free, individual choice as the ONLY basis of any legitimate or just practice. But the text is showing the foundation or origin or creation of just this idea of a self-determining, self-regulating, accountable subject, and it is an ugly story in many regards. How are we MADE into creatures who make and keep promises? Rousseau: how can people be before the law, what

they can only become by way of the law? By coercion, threats, rewards? How is morality itself (the 10 commandments) even established? How is it INTERNALIZED as your conscience? Your reactions often presume a specifically liberal individualism in which any kind of inherited culture or tradition -or any society for that matter- can only be a coercive imposition on your free will -after all you did not consent to it. In what way or for what reason would you "commit," now, to a rule/principle you inherit (e.g. an ideal of equality, a constitution) but did not originate? On what basis would you say "I will it so"?

1C) Remember, Jeremiah wrote Deuteronomy, which means he 'wrote' a history in terms of covenant, failure, suffering, and renewal. That is not how Solomon told the story -Royalists depicted kingship as the culmination of a history originating in Abraham, whereas Jeremiah told a story of failure and divine punishment. Given Solomon's story, Hebrews would interpret the destruction of the northern kingdom as proof that their god was weak, had failed to protect them, and that the Assyrian gods were better because powerful. Jeremiah said, on the contrary, that defeat was a sign of a just god's power, a just god judging the transgressions of a wayward people. At a moment when most hebrews believed god was supposed to be unconditionally supportive, the destruction of the northern kingdom would be readily interpreted as god's failure. Faith in god was saved, so to speak, by making that destruction an act of god. The text thus features not a creator god or a warrior god, but a god of judgment holding people to account for keeping the promises and founding law that the text makes the foundational origin. (Kingship ideology did not stipulate a founding Mosaic covenant.) You see here how the universe is being enchanted in a new way - every single good or bad event is now a sign we interpret as evidence of god's blessing or judgment of our conduct. The text imagines a god ever indifferent or far away, everything that happens to us is a sign of how god judges our conduct. (In turn, material success becomes what Puritans called "a visible sign of god's grace," and, you or your parents take a bad grade as a sign of moral failure, a reflection on your worth or character.) Every event and act is made meaningful in moral(istic) terms. Rather than focus on god's character, I am suggesting, ask why the authors make their god this way? Don't blame god, ask why authors imagine god this way. What is accomplished by THIS god? Remember Lincoln in the Second Inaugural: "if we suppose a just god" ... then expect that the war will go on until "every drop of blood drawn by the lash" is repaid by the (northern and southern) blood "drawn by the sword" - "and the judgments of the lord are righteous altogether." What could make the carnage of this war meaningful? See it as a punishment for the sin of slavery (and both north and south are culpable.) That is Deuteronomic. I am not endorsing this view, this form of meaning-making, but I want you to SEE it.

2) Political issues revisited

A) what is slavery - exploited, disposable labor, no voice in how you are governed, no recognition as warranting respect or reciprocity, subjection to arbitrary often violent power. how

do people escape slavery? What does getting free "from" slavery involve? If there is no individual escape, what commitments must people together make to gain liberation? What risks must they take? What if some of us want to return? Would that jeopardize the whole project? What if some lose faith? Moses and Aaron respond differently to these questions -what judgment in turn do you make? WILDERNESS is the liminal space - free from slavery, but no new commitments -we can say what we don't want, but what do we aspire to?

B) liberation requires saying no, but freedom is sterile if it only negative, so, to what do you say yes, by what commitments do you express freedom in a positive sense? For Moses, commitment to living by covenant (by acts of promising, regardless of content) and commitment to specific promises (10 commandments) is the alternative to enslavement. You see all the dark sides of this. covenant-making is NOT idealized -getting us into it involves fear and violence, incentives and threats -because we are not unanimous, and because we are 'stiff-necked' -NOT in fact compliant or docile- rather, we are "truants." As readers we need not endorse the parental perspective of the text, we could see a dialectical or agonistic relation between people and the founding covenant, and specific rules, just as we do criticize the founding American covenant for its egregious violence. The Bible dramatizes and telescopes the process of founding in all its moral and political complexity, and thus represents the tensions between choice and violence, why choice is desirable and yet why violence sometimes seems (is?) necessary. So the achievement or founding of community is problematic -the achievement of community, the forming of a people is affirmed, but the costs are shown. Are those costs the inescapable price of the ticket, can they minimized? Avoided altogether?

C) what do god and moses want? That we 'love' our first principles and founding promise -Lincoln says dedication and devotion- as Moses says, we do not live by bread alone. We value freedom (as promising) and we value justice (treating others as we wish to be treated, no exemptions or exceptions - which is how Jesus summarized the meaning of the law -love god, and, love your neighbor as yourself.) God and Moses (and Jesus later) do not want mere obedience or submission. Consider how you feel about basic moral laws -is it a transactional attachment, or foundational? Likewise, think about a political community -what establishes duration over time, the sense of being involved in something multi-generational? How is such commitment maintained over time? Imagine that people at first CANNOT know if commitment will bring benefit. They cannot know if they will succeed in surviving at all. But Moses' faith is that they will flourish, living by promises and living by these basic laws. (Why flourish? Because we won't steal, i.e. exploit; we won't covet, i.e. compete and steal; we won't lie, i.e. deceive and manipulate; we won't bear false witness, etc. We live by contrary principles -collaboration, not stealing, reciprocity not exploitation, truth-telling not manipulating, trust not suspicion etc. and, we live by promises, which value choice, reciprocity, and commitment, and disavow force and fraud.) Moses says, the law is not esoteric, not far away, not hard to understand, but near at hand,

as close as your neighbor. But they may doubt that living like this is possible, or, may deem the demand of accountability too burdensome.

D) Priests inserted numerous petty rules into the text, as if to make covenant mean a whole liturgical regime. Imagine them trying to stipulate specific daily action, rather than allow discretion and interpretation of what basic rules mean. Stay focused on the core principles: which would you accept? Imagine the fundamental idea of living by promises, not by obedience to power, but by fidelity to our promises, imagine the text at once introducing and betraying that ideal.

E) God as abusive parent/spouse: If you don't obey ME, I will punish you; if you obey me, I will call that love, not abject terrorized submission. If a parent simply punishes to gain obedience, that is child abuse, it is tyranny. Maybe because I am a parent, I think that Moses or his god want people to learn the idea of a rule, and specific (moral) rules, so that the children internalize both the idea and the specifics, which makes the parent no longer necessary. Parenthood -authority properly understood- should be a self-consuming artifact in Fish's terms. But the process of enculturation involves real conflict, mixed appeals to the kid, parental disappointment (and rage) at kid's stiff-neckedness, the parent and kid can get locked in a thou shalt - I won't impasse. That is the risk/danger the text dramatizes -even provokes. The deep problem being dramatized is creating people who internalize a law or morality as their own conscience, and therefore become morally autonomous and self-regulating. (Nietzsche and Freud will say they remain subjected to the parents/law they have internalized in self-destructive ways, and you may feel that already -but this text is establishing 'morality' and internalization.)

F) why not other gods? Why not pluralism of gods? What is wrong with idols or the golden calf? The issue is not racism, the issue is not ethnic but political. Another 'god' is not just an idea, but a way of life, 'god' is a word for social practices and a regime -pharaoh personified a god, 'egypt' and 'babylon' are dynastic states, divinizing rulers, totally despotic arbitrary power, no covenant, just power, no norms for holding each other (or god) to account (as you do.) Moses/god think that personification is idolatry, whereby human power is worshiped as if divine. The abstraction of god means no person is divine, nor nature, though we have god's breath and hear god's voice, and though the creation is good. God is in a tent, not a temple. Building the temple was dangerously close to returning to Egypt. To give so much power to any institution is idolatry -to money, to states, and I would also say to priests and rituals, even to fixed ideas of god (vs I am that I am) -though the priestly strand makes a place for them. So what is the difference between these other gods/idols and Yahweh? To worship Yahweh is to value ethical conduct as the highest good. To 'submit' to yahway is to make that valuation. Other gods don't value it, rather these gods/regime value power, wealth, status, wealth, rigid social castes, exploitation. To allow such gods among us jeopardizes our whole project, whereas if we value ethical conduct, we will flourish. So, we must make judgments about what to value, mandate,

discourage, or prohibit. Still, yes, this text dictates mono-theism, not a pantheon, and one god imagined THIS way. Hebrews in fact worshiped household and fertility gods and goddesses, but the prophets and Deuteronomists would purge the culture of practices too close to surrounding dynastic states.

G) the Redactors who assembled the bible wanted to produce a pariah people, a people defined by rigid boundaries and imbued with a fear of difference. (A pariah people, not a violent, conquering people.) That is how the priests and leaders thought to preserve a people who lacked land and political autonomy after the loss of national independence. Formation of a rigid identity, through projection of absolute difference. We have every reason to contest this way of conceiving identity. The killing of tribes is figurative, it never happened, BUT the text has been used ever since to justify ideas of ethnic purity or pure and antithetical identities. It has been used by American settlers to exterminate indigenous tribes and take their land. We see this in Trump and ask: what is going on when priests, leaders, people are so anxious about a pure or homogenous identity? Don't attack god, analyze the poets.

I have not addressed all your deep questions -
a) about a conditional or judging vs an unconditionally loving god - the relation between the features of justice and the features of mercy in a god, and how the poets imagined that.

B) about our 'transactional' motives in relations and commitments compared to ideas of pure principles and purely voluntary choices -the ways in which the people who said 'we hold these truths self-evident' were not making a business partnership, but something else - and what is the difference?

C) about amending founding covenant or constitution, about opting out

D) I am especially concerned to address the problem of the second generation - those (like you) who were not "founders" but inherit a covenant and regime you did NOT make and justifiably criticize. In the Deuteronomic text, it is true, people do not MAKE the rules (god gives them) and Moses says to the next generation - you cannot amend them. I think this is an egregious failure or limitation, but I don't think that we are bound by those limits. We want the right and power to make law, to modify covenant/constitution, to encourage contest of interpretations.

Prophecy and Politics

Readings

* Samuel I chaps 1-8
* The Books of Amos, Micah, Hosea, and Isaiah 1-16
* George Shulman, from American Prophecy (x)
* Frederick Douglass, “The Meaning of July 4th to the Negro”(x)
* MLK - speeches (x)
* Allan Ginsberg, “Wichita Vortex Sutra” (x)

Discussion Questions

1. Is there a moment when you would depict the community in crisis and in jeopardy? What would constitute a FUNDAMENTAL violation of its principles? How do we know who to listen to if different “prophets” make different arguments about that violation -some say it is homosexuality, gay marriage, and abortion; others say it is corporate power and endemic racism. Who is to say? How do we decide? At the same time, ask: is the rhetoric of crisis (and of all-or-nothing) itself a problem or is it appropriate and necessary to register the magnitude of a problem or danger?

2. What would it mean to put yourself into the story to see your history and yourself in THIS way? (In contrast to a story of progress from chaos to kingship?) How does the story explain their collective difficulties? If the Hebrews believe the prophet's story, what will they do?

3. Look at the substance of the prophet’s critique:
(A) What is idolatry? Why must there be only one(abstract and invisible) god? Why are prophets so upset about the worship of blocks of wood or stone, a golden calf, or wealth or ritual, as if being wealthy, or doing a ritual, is redemptive?
(B) Prophets hate merely ritual observance, they want people to really “love” JUSTICE. Why is ritual/sacrifice a problem? Why insist that the law be taken inside into the heart, and loved joyfully? If people did this, what would result?
(C) They say people have broken a promise to live justly and without idols. What does it mean to break a promise? DO people betray themselves, or what is best in themselves?

4. How do prophets justify their critique? What entitles them to speak?

5. How do you know or recognize a "prophet"? What is the "office" of a prophet -their role or vocation? Does every group need its prophets? Why?

6. In what senses do prophets present a model of freedom? Those who orient themselves by the internal authority and voice they call god- are “freed” in what senses? (from what?/to do what?) Are they bound and even captured by this god/voice that speaks through them?

7. Prophets hold each person responsible for what others do: they endorse an idea of collective liability. If some of us are unjust, all of us are responsible, and bear the consequences. There is NO INDIVIDUAL SALVATION; WE STAND AND FALL TOGETHER. Are you responsible

for the sins of others? Does the fate of the group rest on action by each? (I think of this especially in regards to historic racism.)

8. Is social criticism, voiced as god's revelation, innately anti-democratic? - because it does NOT follow majority rule, nor the conventional procedures of representation or law.

9. There are TWO traditions of prophecy in the U.S. - one is represented by the line that runs from Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King -it invokes christianity, individual rights, civic responsibility and a redemptive narrative of making good on American exceptionalism The other is represented by the poets, in our reading, Allan Ginsberg and spoken word poetry, now called rap or hiphop. Assess the difference between these kinds of "voice."

Letter Eight: on prophecy

I want to say, first, that I always hated the prophets; they seemed punishing, moralistic, and deranged (thinking they spoke god's voice.) I appreciated their commitment to the poor, but otherwise felt terribly alienated by their style of rhetoric. But when I first read the Hebrew Bible, however, i also read Frederick Douglass, and as a result, I saw prophecy very differently: you white folks made a promise and you violated it; i stand with a god of justice, and so with the poor, and look on your society from that perspective - from outside and below. I stand with god and the slave, he says. How does the conduct of whites then look? Can he persuade them to act differently, to amend their ways. If you read Hebrew prophets with Douglass in mind, they may sound differently than they otherwise might.

Hear the story that prophets tell: we made a covenant with each other and god to live by a certain way; since we Hebrews have not kept our promise(s), god has "called" prophets to "bear witness" about (against) Hebrew conduct. That conduct, prophets say, violates the promises they made with god and each other to found their way of life on two things - rejection of idolatry, and commitment to justice. Notice the story: first, you made a promise -to love justice and to reject idols. (what is idolatry - to 'worship' (to love, seek, value) material things or institutions or rituals rather than seek justice or the word of god.) Second, you broke the promise. Third, prophets say: "repent" -which means "turn," and thereby "return" to your founding covenant and your god. Fourth, if you don't 'amend your ways,' you will be invaded & destroyed -"punished' by a god of justice who will allow even endorse your suffering. (you could put this claim into the form - your conduct produces self-destruction and failure.) Notice the logical must, the imperative voice: IF you promise X you CANNOT do Y - you could say they are imposing this on you, or you could say they are disclosing the meaning or logic of your professed ideals, which you violate by certain actions, and fulfill by others. Notice also the logical must or imperative voice in their IF - THEN statements - IF you do X there are Y consequences, but if you do A, then B follows. Again, are they imposing on you, or depicting a logic (of cause and consequence) you would rather disavow?

The prophets say the community has betrayed its justifying purpose and covenant by worshiping idols and allowing rampant social injustice. But the people who live in monarchical Israel believe they remain blessed by god unconditionally -no matter what they do. They can exploit their Hebrew neighbors and worship other gods, but be blessed by Yahweh, because they (or their priests) practice certain rituals in the temple, which is what they think God requires of them. So when prophets say, your conduct is wrong and the community is going down, the prophets seem crazy to their audience, and prophetic calls for repentance are ignored.

1. What is Prophecy? What is a prophet?

What makes a prophet? it is to assume an 'office' or 'calling' and it is to speak in a certain idiom or genre. Imagine prophecy as an "office" of those who are:
* messengers, announcing what is unsaid or unspeakable, realities or truths we have denied at great cost to others and ourselves, responsibilities we would evade, conduct we would disavow, consequences we would wish away;

* witnesses, testifying to what and who is excluded, cast outside recognition, made invisible or unreal. Unlike legal witnesses, who simply must say what they see (the whole truth and nothing but the truth) prophets say what they see and stand against it. They enact judgment as they remember what/who we "forget" or disavow. (The struggle against power is thus the struggle of memory against forgetting.)

* 'watchmen' who forewarn in order to forestall;

* singers who compose lamentations about the suffering we bring down on ourselves, and about the suffering others impose on us, which we must somehow find a way to survive, conditions of suffering we must somehow make a condition for our action to create a future.

Imagine that by making present what and who is absent from our awareness, what and who we make absent or invisible or unreal, they would reconstitute, re-found, or re-generate our community, for if we could acknowledge what and who we disavow, that acknowledgment would be transforming.

Now imagine that the features of the office are related to modes of address: a messenger announces, a witness testifies, a watchman warns, a singer laments and consoles. imagine prophecy involves tones of voice, idioms of expression, forms of judgment and appeal. Imagine that prophecy becomes a genre, that is, a convention of expression that is recognizable, that sets audience expectations for what a 'prophet' sounds like, forms of expression by which a prophet would be recognized in contrast to, say, a scientist or a salesman or a general.

(A) It is important to recognize that kings employ prophets, who claim to speak for a god that unconditionally blesses the royal house. I call them house prophets, to invoke Malcolm X's distinction between "house" and "field" blacks. For those who were later canonized as "the" prophets stood against organized power and its media. Amos thus said he was not a prophet. They are cast as madmen and illegitimate, for they stand against the normal and legitimate, against what is called justice. So the question is: by what authority do they speak? And how do we distinguish 'true' and 'false' prophets?

(B) It is not an accurate prediction that defines prophecy, though prophets are able to see that conduct has consequences, and they warn about it. They are visionaries who, in the name of god, announce the relationship between conduct and consequences. They thereby address the fate of the whole. They say what they see and they stand against it. They both SEE what is and JUDGE what they see. (Thoreau jokes that prophets utter 'sentences' in both senses.) They announce or reveal what we willfully deny or willfully make ourselves blind to -in our conduct, in our history, in the nature of reality. Vision and Judgment; bearing witness; giving testimony. They thereby raise "Socratic" questions: how are we to live? Is what we value worth valuing? In the end, YOU are the judge of their responses, and in the end the authority of decision and action is in YOUR hands. They put it there: they tell a story in which action is up to you -will we "turn" from your current conduct, from the conduct that defines our history? CAN we change? (Prophets insist, yes.) Will the consequences of that conduct haunt or destroy us? Is it too late? (Think climate change, think a descent into fascism.) Maybe so.

C) In what sense are they "political"? They address the nature of the regime, the character of power, the fate of the whole; they unmask the ruling ideas of an age, to quote Marx, to expose an alternative way of viewing reality; they expose choices we did not know we had. Are they political in the sense that they engage us in dialogue? They seem so dogmatic! They think there is no REAL dialogue now, because so many people are silenced, because certain subjects are unspeakable, taken off the table, because the enfranchised or powerful don't really want to be challenged, but want reassurance, solace, validation, which they get from authorities Fish calls 'bad physicians.' Whereas "false" prophets give us "smooth" words and "say peace, peace when there is no peace," these prophets provoke us, challenge us, and thereby, maybe, create a space for a dialogue that is currently impossible. They do so by asking: in what do you lodge value? what is worth valuing and what is a worthy life? What are the consequences of your conduct? Can you live otherwise? We want to know: by what right do you speak to us in such critical tones? They invoke the god we claim to obey, i.e. invoke your OWN professed commitments. Hebrew prophets invoke god, and Frederick Douglass invokes equality and self-determination: each says, I do not impose my values on you but take seriously values you profess but actually desecrate. You ask: by what right do they judge us? They say, you are obliged to judge each other: silence is complicity in evil, not judging is still a moral act, and refusal to judge is consequential. There is no neutral ground. We MUST hold each other accountable, voicing the 'honest indignation' that Blake called 'the voice of god," and then adjudicate our differences.

D) Notice how prophecy originates: the people ask for kings. They want to be like other peoples. They don't want to be a confederation, a republic, and so unlike all the empires around them. They want to have someone exalted lead them in battle. They don't want a column of smoke or fire, or an otherwise invisible god; they want a personification of themselves. A leader, a president. People ask for a king: kingship originates in majority rule; kingship is democratic in origin, it is authorized by consent. People ask for a kings and leaders, powerful states. Likewise, slavery is democratically authorized: it was the law of the land, mandated by majority rule and every elected official north and south, for years. Likewise, Indian removal as it was called in the 19th century was democratically authorized, also Vietnam, and every other imperial war. You can say elites mislead people (as Isaiah does) but when prophets stand against power, it is not only the power of the state as an anti-democratic institution. They stand against democratically authorized practices -wars on terror, slavery, idolatries of various kinds. For prophets, democracy is a problem. Majority rule is a problem. The majority is an authority that competes against the authority of god (or conscience.) When is majority rule all right? Who is to say? By what criteria? The prophets do live in a vexed relationship to democracy because they do not assume that our preferences warrant representation, or that majority rule defines justice.

E) Prophets say to the Hebrews: you profess to worship god, but you worship idols, or you worship god idolatrously, that is, ritualistically rather than doing what god really requires, which is acting ethically. They say: You've got it all wrong! (Douglass says to white Americans: you claim to worship equality, but you actually worship privilege and hierarchy, or to the extent that you do practice equality, you imagine it in a narrow, exclusive, legalistic way.) Who is following the "real" Hebrew tradition: Solomon or Amos? If kings for three hundred years have worshiped other gods besides Yahweh, isn't that ok? Who ever said that God made his support for us conditional on our ethical conduct? It sounds to us like you prophets are just making up a god, and imposing it on us. YOU are the false prophets, we say. Likewise, who is following the "real"

American tradition: Calhoun and Jefferson Davis, or Douglass? So the elements and meaning of "tradition" is not self-evident but created by interpretation of a complex history we must interpret, about which we disagree, and from which conflicting figures voices draw contrasting legacies. Members (Hebrews, Christians, Jews, Americans, etc) derive themselves in conflicting ways from a legacy they created by interpretation and narrative.

F) Clearly, prophets stand against the dominant or prevailing ideology - monarchical, polytheist, ritualized. They are alienated figures. They stand against what Schneidau calls "myth" -the ideology by which human conventions are naturalized or sanctified, as if divinely mandated or naturally required. If myth turns history into nature, prophets expose history again, to reveal human power and invention. But if we live inside the myth we call common sense, prophets see our common sense not just as flawed or mistaken in particular ways, but as DERANGED, as systematically and willfully, culpably, blind. They judge not specific (individual) acts of corruption or idolatry, but collective and ongoing violation of core principles, just as Douglass sees slavery as constitutive or central to American life in every regard. They depict their audiences as shockingly disassociated from reality.

(G) Prophets are thus revising/interpreting the tradition they invoke. They invoke first principles, they claim to recover core commitments, but clearly they are RE-interpreting god and equality in unprecedented ways, and yet, they claim to get at the real or true meaning of those commitments or principles. Thus, prophets are the first great critics of "religion"-there is worshiping god truly, as compared to institutional "religion." Likewise, Douglass (and Thoreau) are great critics of "democracy" as the name of a regime (of slaveholding and corporate power) as opposed to a genuine practice of equal self-determination. That is why Blake loves prophets and prophecy. To "obey" god is to do what? To denounce ritual and religion! To value conscience! To always seek justice! To seek the infinite in every apparently particular thing! To question what it is we value! To love our neighbor as ourselves! To identify with the excluded, the non-citizens! To bear witness to what is excluded (god and the poor) and make what is excluded present to us.

(H) Prophets were concerned about the fate of a people. George says that <u>before exile</u>, prophets hoped to reconstitute a regime by renewing its first/founding principles. Ask: do they want to go back to earlier time, literally? It sometimes sounds that way, yes, as if they would go back to the confederation before kings. OR, do they want to go back to the "true" meaning of principles, which have been corrupted? As if people once understood god rightly, and we just have to recover that understanding? I think they are not so much "returning" to origins or principles ('god') in a literal way as getting us to re-commit to a principle even as they revise its meaning. (They don't SAY they are revising the meaning of god any more than Douglass says he is revising the meaning of equality. Why not? Because they do not want to appear as innovators? Because they really think they have the right meaning?) But IF we understand god or equality as they do, our whole history appears differently. We will be horrified and ashamed. We will JUDGE our history, and its meaning very differently than we used to. Monarchy will NOT seem the culmination or fulfillment of Hebrew history, the supreme climax of a promise begun with Abraham, but it will appear as a horrible travesty. Likewise, Americans would say: democracy has NEVER BEEN PRACTICED here! We have been deluded about who we are. To "repent" is to make this fundamental turn or re-orientation. To "repent" is to see one's conduct and history in a new way, and to commit to changing conduct to make history otherwise.

I) Repentance and Forgiveness.
Before exile prophets say, if we amend our ways, god will forgive us; then they say: it is too late to avoid the consequences of our history; we will be "punished" by god, but if we THEN repent and seek god's pardon, our children will be brought back from exile. What is this emphasis on punishment?

(1) why are "innocent" Hebrews punished? They are members of a community, and there is no exemption from its fate. Is that unjust? For Arendt, all Germans were collectively responsible, though not personally/morally guilty. Lincoln's Second Inaugural says north and south are both responsible for slavery. Should there be exemptions?

(2) why insist on punishment at all? (a) "Punishment" is the name for consequences of conduct, as effects follow causes - but moralized as if we "deserve" what happens to us. (I bet you say or think this all the time.) (b) Punishment is also tightly linked to the idea of responsible agency, law, and justice as a package -e.g. people must 'pay' for what they do as the meaning of justice, a meaning that depends on treating us as free beings who could choose otherwise. (c) We might say: if you admit what you did, and ask for forgiveness, then punishment is not necessary? But what does asking for forgiveness already presume? And what if we don't seek forgiveness because we refuse to admit 'fault' or responsibility? If there is a mercy beyond justice, as Moses and prophets say, is it this unconditional love? But is justice still necessary?

(3) prophets are imagining what it means to keep a community together. Promises on the one hand, but what if people break promises to each other? How do we enforce our commitments? We repent and seek forgiveness from each other when we trespass -Moses' dream is that, the more fully we 'love' the law, the more we internalize it, the less is punishment necessary. The more we put law INSIDE, the less we need police outside (we each police ourselves, but we also police each other, holding each other accountable. We don't delegate.) The more you LOVE the law, the less you need to fear punishment for violating it. There is sense to this, no? But the costs are high: intensely guilty people living by prohibitions they remain inwardly fearful of breaking? We read Blake's response: You cannot MAKE people "love" the law; prohibition generates resistance not love, and punishment generates fear not love; You cannot achieve justice by law, prohibition and punishment. Indeed, <u>law is the obstacle to justice</u>. The only way to fulfill justice, which the law claims to want, is by eliciting our loving energies. The question is: how can we cultivate care for the good or aspiration toward justice in each of us?

(J) Prophets are trying to sustain a people to which they are profoundly attached. Hosea and his god call Israel their "beloved." Critical truth-telling is an act of 'love' as a caring attachment, to <u>sustain a relationship,</u> especially one in crisis. They depict a failure, a breach, a divorce - and ask: how can we begin again? How can we address our divisions and wounds and grievances? How can we reconcile? What would it take to <u>resume</u> community when it has been and is so broken? (Think of South Africa and the 'truth and reconciliation' process or of the U.S. now)

(K) Especially once the Hebrew are exiled, prophets are asking: what is the meaning of this catastrophe? (First there was the catastrophe of monarchy as tyranny and the dispossession of the poor, now there is the catastrophe of the whole people dispossessed.) What is the meaning of our

suffering? Did we bring this on ourselves? How can we go on? What will enable us to survive exile and continue? Prophets "answer" these questions; they create a narrative that 'answers' the problem of suffering by giving it a meaning; they address the meaning of (partly by explaining) our suffering.

(L) Accordingly, prophets ask: in what does your redemption consist? You seek redemption -from work, wealth, children, power, success, the esteem of others, from ritual, from forms of identity- but is redemption to be found in those practices or investments? Are we mistaken? Moses and prophets sometimes suggest redemption emerges in the commitments and practices that make us a free people because we live by covenant. Is it love, therefore, as Moses implies but Jesus and MLK insist, that is redemptive? (As Baldwin will argue, love not as sentiment but as a way of living justice with neighbors? Redemption then also seems to consist in the story we tell ourselves to make our suffering meaningful, as if it is story-telling that in itself "redeems" our suffering. Nietzsche thus says it is our art that redeems us, art not only as a given story, a created artifact, but as our ongoing practices of meaning-making.

2. What are the core issues that the Hebrew prophets -and the genre they create- bequeath?

(A) does the universe operate by moral criteria so that the wicked suffer and the innocent prosper? Is everything that happens a sign of god's judgment, or providence, or tests of our virtue? Is there an underlying moral purpose written into life? Or, should we say that life is amoral -beyond good & evil? (we turn next to how The Book of Job addresses such questions)

(B) What kinds of speech -arguments &/or poetry- and what kind of actions (including speaking out in public) will enable an audience to face the aspects of life and history they tend to disavow, forget, or evade? By logos, argument, logic? evidence? What is the "scorching irony" that Douglass proposes? By dramatization of a visionary ('utopian') alternative to the way things are?

(C)How can people be encouraged to care for justice? what is the relationship between the heart and the law, between the spirit and ritual, between justice as an ideal and its worldly embodiment in ordinary practices of living? Can our capacities for love and mutual aid render law, prohibition and punishment -and thus the state- unnecessary?

(D)Is our god the god of ALL people(s)? Do the commandments of our god apply to everyone? Or, are there different (even opposed) moral schemas and gods for diverse peoples? When later exilic prophets imagine all nations coming to Zion and recognizing our God as the ONLY god, bringing people to THE ONE MORALITY, is this universalism an advance, or a form of imperialism? Is it better to say, as Nietzsche will argue, that we have our god/way, and that others have their gods/ways?

(E) In what practices, institutions, ideas or people do we lodge redemption? what beliefs or practices "save" us? love? art? political action? serving the purposes of our god?

(F) False prophecy: According to those now canonized as "the Hebrew prophets," a "false prophet" says "peace, peace when there is no peace," as if to deny antagonisms and conflicts we must face to find real peace. A false prophet depicts god giving a DECREE as a fixed fate, rather

than calling on us or summoning us to a DECISION that will make the future. True prophets depict actions with consequences, which may seem fated but were in our hands.. False prophets stand with the powerful, the normal, the legitimate, not with the stigmatized, marginalized, and dominated, with the least of us as Jesus put it. False prophets demonize adversaries. BUT, there is no obvious rule to self-evidently distinguish, because there is a GENRE of speech that the true and the false share, and there is no umpire to tell us who to listen to - MLK, or, the right-wing Christian evangelical movement -or Qanon now- which speak in the genre of prophecy, too.

3. I want to conclude with a long quote from Herbert Schneidau, one of the great writers about Hebrew prophecy:

"The important thing is not just to be religious, to worship something, somehow. the important thing is to find, or be found by, the right god and to reject and struggle against the others. The worship of any other god is a form of slavery; to pay homage to the forces of nature, to the spirit of a particular place/land, to a nation or race...is to submit to slavery and degradation. The religion of the Hebrew Bible begins by saying to such gods, 'i do not believe and i will not serve.' the only true god is the god of freedom. the other gods make you feel at home in a place; they confirm the quiet cycle of the seasons, with the familiar landscape you grew up in and love; with them you know where you are. but the harsh god of freedom calls you out of all this, into a desert where all the old familiar landmarks are gone, where you cannot rely on the safe workings of nature, on the springtime and harvest, where you must wander in wilderness waiting for what god will bring. this god of freedom will allow you noneof the comforts of religion. not only does he tear you away from the old traditional shrines and temples of your native place, but he will not even allow you to worship HIM in the old way. you are forbidden to invoke his name in magical rites. you must deny the other gods, and you must not treat YHWH as a god in those conventional ways. You are not to try to comprehend god within the conventions and symbols of your time and place; you are to have no image of god because god is "I am what I am" - and "will be what I will be" - a VOICE of freedom, and because man [humanity] is made in THIS image, which is impossible to represent in any specific way."

I am not saying Schneidau is right about prophecy, or the Hebrew god. but he is getting at ONE crucial aspect - the alienation from the given social and natural world -and the complicated meaning of FREEDOM. But he therefore tends toward an ideal of the alienated individual, whereas prophecy (e.g. Amos, frederick douglass or mlk) is also profoundly committed to social justice, to the flourishing of a human community. PROPHECY DISCUSSION

4. additional and specific comments on class discussion and response papers.

1) prophecy is not about prediction, it is not like science or weather; it is an argument about cause and effect, conduct and consequences, and it is following out the future consequences of conduct now, though that future will NOT happen IF we amend our ways. if the future they fear DOES happen, the prophet has FAILED. What prophecy is, fundamentally, is calling for a decision that will remake the collective present and shape a collective future on different terms

than the past seems to dictate. it is about decision, and the fate we co-author, not some divine decree.

2) prophets are 'called' or 'summoned' by 'god' - which is to say they believe they are speaking god's word, though they also make those words their own. They are vessels. That means WE, the audience, have to judge whether to take them at their word. the concept of prophecy necessarily entails, therefore, the concept of false prophecy. but as with point #1, the decision or the authority is in OUR hands. But audiences typically revile and reject the prophets in their midst, or, they only see the "house prophets" who work for established institutions and elites (e.g. the media or talking heads) rather than the ones who are NOT accredited. (Simon & Garfunkel had it right: prophecy is written on subway walls and tenement halls.) it is the sense that words come from god (from deep within) that is the transition to the idea of poetic inspiration, and that is why Blake, and romanticism in the 19th century, imagined that poets and prophets were related. They are disturbed people, ec-centric, you could say inspired or inspirited, but you could also say possessed, driven, etc. (MLK says by endless dissatisfaction, Blake says by creative genius)

3) when they contrast what god really wants ("justice") to us lodging redemption in money or status, this is not them invoking what is higher against what is material, vulgar lower. They are not splitting the material (money) and the spiritual (justice.) Justice is about meeting your material (or social) needs in a way that does not require the domination or exploitation of others. Justice is about the terms of relation (as opposed to forms of disavowal) around which and whose needs are met, and how. For Hebrew prophets, the point of justice is not soul salvation, not individual redemption, but about flourishing together and in this life, this world, not the next one. the language of what higher (spirit) and lower (body) is the legacy of christianity (and Plato) not the hebrews or the prophets up through and including Jesus. to repeat #1, prophecy is fundamentally political because it is oriented toward collective life and worldly flourishing, and because it depicts choices and decisions -power- in our hands.

4) the language of punishment -that God is “punishing” the Hebrews by allowing them to be invaded and exiled- is really disturbing, i totally agree. god punishing people for their misconduct. but if you imagine that they are imagining themselves by the way they imagine god. then what are they saying? think about climate change - is global warming "punishment"? i think it is a terrible legacy to think about consequences as punishment. i would rather talk about self-defeat, self-betrayal, self-destruction as well as catastrophic consequences and leave the language of punishment out of it. but that is how people first develop causal thinking as well as ideas of responsibility for conduct and its consequences. (think of Arendt on ‘collective responsibility.) I am with Blake on this - the language of prohibition and punishment always fails to motivate conduct. it does not produce willing commitment. (but might fear of consequences - as in global warming - sometimes produce motivation?)

5) the core problem prophets face is that you can't coerce care for justice. Nor can you really "persuade" people to it by logos or argument, though "self-interest rightly understood" may help

someone begin to develop a sense that what happens to THEM affects what happens to ME, and maybe, after some time, he will come to feel there is actual inherent value in taking others into account. But biblical prophets do not explore these options, though you see these considerations in all great American social critics, especially in regards to race. what will enable or encourage or impel whites to think differently about those they disavow and dominate? they practice domination or allow practices that differentiate lives and resources, yet also disavow or disclaim what they are doing and causing. their denial occurs by making up stories (about nature, god, the pathologies of black people) to justify the inequality they will not take responsibility for. do they "know" they are in fact the cause of the inequality and suffering they see? This is one of the set of questions that Hebrew prophets bequeath. We wonder, do prophets offer knowledge to remedy ignorance? or if the ignorance and blindness is willful, if in some deep way people refuse to know what they could know, to see what is in plain sight, then are prophets announcing what people really do already know, but have refused to really admit? there are many clusters here, germane to climate change, sexual violence, endemic racism.

6) There is one other aspect to emphasize that many of you got at through douglass. prophets want a 'turn' toward god and justice, away from ritual and status. it is cast as a "return" to a covenant hebrews abandoned or betrayed. but they cannot go backwards in time, nor are they nostalgic. they are calling not for a literal return as if in a time machine (as we fear Trump people actually hope for) but a 'turn' to renew a principle we profess, and such a turn always involves reimagining what the principle means and how to practice it. Douglass knows whites never practiced the equality they profess, but he invokes the principle and interprets it as requiring the end of slavery - that would be a 'return' to it but also a remaking of what it means. its meaning is not fixed or final, or even self-evident, though the declaration says so. think about disability rights in the last 20 years - who thought of disabled people as excluded from the declaration? - but they were - so that inclusion means actually thinking about equality and justice in new and unexpected ways. we ‘return’ to the principle in many senses that include reinterpretation of what it means, how to practice it, and who is the we who holds it. In these regards, i believe Machiavelli not only appropriated the exodus story in his arguments about the conditions of initiating a new order of things, and his insistence that only an armed prophet can succeed, but he also drew from the genre of prophecy specifically when he argued that any body (religious or political) can be “renewed” (can overcome its corruption and decline) by ‘returning” to “first principles.” It is no coincidence that the genre of prophecy and the idiom of small-r republicanism overlap in so many ways.

From Theodicy to Tragedy: the Book of Job

Readings

* Mitchell, The Book of Job (read text THEN Mitchell's intro)
* Abraham LIncoln, "Second Inaugural"

Discussion Questions

1. How does the text view/comment on the Deuteronomic idea of a moral/just god who rules the universe by applying fixed ("moral") categories of good and evil to our conduct? How does the text view the Deuteronomic idea that the universe is ethically rational, i.e. that the good (will) prosper and the wicked (will) suffer?

(A) Does the text offer a vision of a God beyond good and evil, as MItchell argues in his intro? Does God teach Job to love (to 'surrender' to) life regardless of its injustice? Does the BEAUTY of life supplant or at least compete with the moral/ethical standards that lead Job to condemn life as unjust?
AND/OR:
(B) Does Job refuse to relent in his demand for justice, and does God indeed hear Job, so that God atones for his injustice by saying, at the end, that it was JOB (not the friends) who said 'the things that are right.' - i.e. that all Job's accusations were true and justified.

C) Assess the friends, who say that Job should not contend with god, and who say that Job is either sinful and rightly punished, or, innocent but soon-to-be vindicated. How does the text position us toward their arguments?

(D)is the text's lesson that, since there is no standard of justice innate or natural in life, and no providential God guided by justice, human beings must make their own standard of justice, and try to hold the universe to it? not to say it is 'merely' human, but necessary, valuable, even if life is in tension with it?

2. How does the text view motivations for doing justly? (The devil says God is bribing Job to good conduct by worldly rewards...) Does the text in the end endorse doing justice for its own sake, regardless of reward?

3. What is the role of POETRY in the text: why does god speak by poetry not rational argument?

4. What has happened to the Mosaic covenant, the idea of law, the internalization of conscience?

5. What would the author of Job -the 'Job poet'- say to Amos, Isaiah, Douglass or MLK?

6. To call the text a "tragedy" is to say what about it?

7. When Lincoln says that the north and south each imagined a god on their side, is he channeling the author of Job, and the idea that no human can possibly claim god as an ally?

When he says that the war will continue until every drop drawn by the lash shall be paid for blood drawn by the sword - is he channeling prophecy? As a political theologian, what is he saying to north and south about slavery and the war? (Notice Lincoln's locution - IF WE SUPPOSE a just god.....why speak in that conditional a way?)

Letter Nine: Job

1. The earlier prophets argued that the Hebrews were being invaded and destroyed because god was punishing their sins, that is, because a just god was using empires to punish the Hebrews for their unjust conduct and idolatry. Those empires (in their "pride") will think that they themselves are the source of their victories, but God will bring down these empires. And bring the exiled Hebrews home. There is a pedagogy to this story: if we understand our suffering as in some sense caused by our actions, we take responsibility in a way that leads us to repent and seek pardon, which is the condition of gaining forgiveness. (For Rabbinic Judaism the lesson is - admit fault and seek pardon from those people you have harmed, and only then can you seek forgiveness from god -i.e. god wants you to take responsibility and make things right with those you harm.) Prophets are also making a "theodicy" that "justifies god": as we undergo invasion and exile, we might think that our god is powerless, but in fact, prophets argue, our god is arranging the whole experience. It is from this (prophetic) point of view that exodus and deuteronomy are written: god cares about justice above all, demands just conduct from his people as a condition of their flourishing, and punishes their transgressions as part of his covenant with them. So monotheism is the vehicle by which LAW (and thereby morality or moral conduct) is made the highest value. A creator god and then warrior god has become a god of righteousness, whose power is always an expression of justice. Justice is incarnated in the idea of covenant -we promise to abide by this code of doing unto others- and over time this code and this demand is internalized, and then it appears as the conscience of each of us. That means that the political formation of a people, and the formation of a moral subject (or "individual") are two sides of one process. Morality as you know it is a political achievement, occurring through the formation of a specific (chosen) people, whose particular law becomes "morality as such." In turn, "morality" (do unto others, the golden rule and accountability for conduct) is used to criticize actual (or "positive") laws, which will be seen as unjust and rejected in the name of conscience and a "higher" law, as MLK models. The Book of Job is the culmination AND critique of this development.

2. The Book of Job is a critique of Deuteronomy

(A) The accuser (an aspect of god, god's own doubt) asks: does Job really value justice? Does Job's strict perhaps even rigid or anxious adherence to the law suggest someone who really values justice? Is his piety (always observant) a problem? Is he too concerned with formalities, rituals? Too much "the letter" of the law, at the expense of "the spirit" of the law? Moses partly voices this concern when he asks people to "love" the law, but by way of prophets we are getting beyond loving "the law" to something like loving justice, which law may violate. Job's God HOPES (believes?) that Job does value justice for its own sake, as its own reward so to speak, that Job is a person of moral integrity, not just piety. God cannot answer the Accuser's question until Job loses the rewards that god bestows. So every catastrophe befalls him, all allowed by god to "test" Job's integrity. So the first thing the text does, is separate Job from all the

blessings/rewards that the Hebrew cosmology promises the pious, who are presumably also righteous. (This is analogous to the moment in Plato's Republic, when Glaucon and Ademeintus demand of Socrates to prove the value of living justly, even if there are no rewards and even if it brings great suffering.) The Job who emerges after a week of silence and mourning has already changed from the smug and confident man he once was, and then he changes again after his experience of the whirlwind.

(B) What does Job see because he is stripped of god's rewards? He goes from being normative, legitimate, prosperous -"blessed"- to being completely cast out. He sees the world differently: 1) he sees the homeless and poor in a new way -he sees the contingency of life- for he could be one of THEM, that being destitute and bereft is no sign of sin or failure; 2) he sees the injustice of a world in which the wicked prosper and the innocent and righteous suffer - he sees a world in which god's sun shines on wicked and virtuous alike; 3) he feels human sentience, vulnerability, frailty, subjection to the harshness of life, and he acutely feels mortality as an indictment of life; but 4) he discovers his voice - he does not simply collapse inside but expresses his sense of indignation that god makes a life and world that is so unjust, and indifferent to our needs, desires, and hopes. IN this way Job is cast by the poet as an EVERYMAN who speaks for us, who expresses how we feel about life. He is not exempt, he is not safe and protected; he is in the gutter. And from this place he both laments that he was ever born.

C) The Book of Job is a critique of the "friends," who cannot tolerate the irrationality and randomness and totally unmerited suffering that Job at once demonstrates and denounces. They cannot let in the truth he embodies - that ethical conduct and worldly consequences are NOT related, that people can suffer horribly for no reason. They cannot bear the question his example raises: why is there this unmerited suffering? Instead of even asking this question, as Job does, they just repeat the Deuteronomic ideology: suffering is god's punishment of (y)our sins -we suffer because we are sinful, and a just god punishes us. And if you see the triumph of evil in the world or the prosperity of the wicked, that is only temporary: in the end, a just god will give them their just deserts, and the righteous will be rewarded. If you are really innocent, you will be vindicated, and if you are wicked, you will be punished. The universe is ethically rational because conduct and consequences are related, and this whole cosmology is built on the premise that moral fault generates (just) suffering. By arguing this, the friends defend god; they invent what we call theodicy. But Job says - my suffering is unmerited; I am innocent, and this is an indictment of god's injustice. And at the end of the text God says: Job said the things that are right/true.

(D) What is the text's picture of god and the universe? God invented light and darkness, good and evil, says second Isaiah. Darkness is PART of god and god's creation. God's sun does shine on wicked and virtuous alike. The text sees what Blake calls "contraries," without which there is no life. "Life" and "God" are aligned in the poet's vision of a universe that is includes good and evil in its plenitude, that includes exuberant creativity and destructiveness. Job is led by his suffering at first to CONDEMN life: he wishes he had never been born. He needs to be brought to a point where he can AFFIRM life despite its injustice and his suffering. So god reveals the magnificence of life to him, as the poet reveals it to us. (We stand with Job; as god works on Job so the poetry works on us.) We are "humbled" -we are awe-full- by the plenitude of life, we are struck by the beauty of a nature that includes violence. We are struck by the poetry that gives god

such images and voice to render the sublime. So, Mitchell's Job does not "submit" to god but "surrenders" to a life that exceeds our (merely human) moral norms. "Why me?" is the wrong question - we are not central to creation, this suffering is not about me, not my doing or fault; we need to put our suffering in this other context or perspective, to see it as part of this larger magnificence.

(E) But god says: Job speaks rightly i.e. Job is correct in his critique of me, that is, of life's injustice. The friends, who try to make life ethically rational, are wrong. God confirms Job's argument, even as he tries to change Job's motivations. I take the text to thereby say to us: hold onto your sense of justice, but also recognize our human limits in a wider, amoral universe; demand justice and make the world more just, hold each other to account, and be indignant at human injustice. BUT remember that life in toto is not a moral phenomena. Then we can be compassionate about suffering, which is not the sign of sin; then we can be less resentful about life itself. Suffering and injury are PART of life. I would propose that The Book of Job presents a tragic point of view, or is a tragedy, in the sense that god and job dramatize points of views on life, and the text at once affirms AND criticizes each of the perspectives it voices for us; we need to credit the necessity of BOTH views, held in tension. (As God asks Job: "Am I wrong because you are right?") We should not let go of the standards we call morality or justice, but we should not curse life because of them. We need to love justice, but also affirm the goodness -awesomeness- of a life that includes evil and suffering.

3. The book of Job is thus the culmination (and not only critique) of the hebrew/biblical tradition because: here is a man who has internalized the idea of justice to such a degree that he holds the whole universe to account, presuming even to judge god by his moral code. He takes up the idea of judgment, of holding others -even god- accountable for their conduct. And he therefore demands, in a Socratic sense, that god give an account of -give reasons for, explain- his conduct. (Note that god responds not only by a display of power, but he responds to Jobs questions with his own questions- the text is full of questions we cannot answer!) Here we see how the covenant tradition is profoundly connected with democratic practice: hold each other accountable and demand from each other an account of your actions: are we -each of us, and all of us together- acting justly? So what IS justice, then? What DOES our god require? Have we misunderstood god? Is what we call justice really justice? Do you see how political this is? At the same time, it is by the internalization of law, internalized as conscience, that the Hebrews generate something like an ethical religion, or a religion fundamentally concerned with ethics, that produces people like Job, figures of such integrity. In this process, law (and god and conscience) are subjected to critique, and to revision. And in The Book of Job, you see that tradition overcoming (or at least chastening) the moral(istic) perspective it invented and transcendentalized. Morality is put in context: morality is necessary to life, but life itself exceeds moral criteria. Unless we appreciate the BEAUTY of life -its fecundity, transience, constant change and destruction, its bewildering complexity- we become not moral but moralistic, self-righteous, moral police. I want to say that the BOOK (by way of the god it imagines) does "humbles" Job not in the sense of crushing him, but to enable ACKNOWLEDGMENT that life IS constant transience, and that he is mortal. ("I am comforted that I am dust.") Our relationship to life is not one of knowledge or knowing, but of acknowledging or accepting. Baldwin ends Notes of a Native Son" with this passage:

“It began to seem to that one would have to hold in the mind two ideas which seemed to be in opposition. The first idea was acceptance ...totally without rancor, of life as it is and men as they are; in the light of this idea it goes without saying that injustice is a commonplace. But this did not mean that one could be complacent, for the second idea was of equal power: that one must never...accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one’s strength. This fight begins in the heart and it has been laid to my charge to keep my own heart free of hatred and despair.”

(The lesson is not nihilism, as if nothing matters, that is bitterness and despair; the lesson is this tension between accepting life as it is and struggling for justice, both, however incommensurable and incompatible, both aspects are necessary.)

4. There are different views of the text, in contrast to Mitchell or George. Jack Miles (in a book called The Biography of God) argues that Job holds onto his view of justice, never relents from his critique of God, and forces God to atone (signaled by god restoring to Job what he had taken away.) For Miles, God openly concedes the truth Job’s critique; for Miles the text teaches that god is NOT above morality, and should not be. For Miles, what triumphs at the end of the story is our idea of morality, our moral idea of an ethical life organized by justice -god tries to make right what he had done - that just as we must struggle against our own dark side, so must god. For Miles, Job becomes God’s conscience to remind god of what justice requires, to help god face his own destructiveness. For Mitchell what triumphs is an aesthetic view of life: to see the beauty in all of creation, including vultures and destructiveness, is to move from a moral to an aesthetic point of view.)

5. There is a danger in these arguments about suffering and in this view of life as an aesthetic phenomena. For Job can be read in a way that justifies and fosters quiescence, resignation, passivity. Why do people suffer - well, as Donald Rumsfeld famous said of the Iraq War that he started, “stuff happens,” as if it were just life bringing injury, and not human agency. Then all suffering becomes something like bad weather - no one is responsible. We need to hold onto Job’s questions: who causes my suffering? Is it other human beings? Is it beyond my control? POLITICS is so much about these questions: who causes our suffering? Who is responsible? (Katrina: how much was the suffering a result of the hurricane, how much faulty levee construction, how much tardy government response, how much poverty, how much racism?) What can WE do about it? (Poverty used to be considered a fact of nature, but no longer: We hold each other accountable for it. Like the friends, some say -You are poor because you lack the right character, your suffering is YOUR fault, -whereas radicals find causes of poverty in systemic structures -but there is the argument -how do we explain and address suffering, distinguishing its causes and remedies.

6. It is crucial to see why the Book of Job speaks in POETRY: the poetry of the text is not decorative or ornamental, but its very mode of communication. It is something like GOD’S poetry: I mean, the poetry is the self-revealing voice of existence; what the poet calls “god,” and what god reveals to Job in poetry, is the nature of existence itself, of being, of life. Existence does NOT “argue” with us, nor does existence COMMAND us. Rather the nature of life is REVEALED to us -in language. The poet offers a dramatic and poetic vision of existence as inexhaustibly rich in creative energies - and we are puny, vulnerable creatures in relation to these

vast energies -BUT- if we are CONSCIOUS of this miracle, then we can PARTICIPATE in it, however humbly, and by that participation we can be elevated, exhilarated, transformed. We achieve the DIGNITY that such consciousness bestows on humans. What God does in the text -in pushing Job to recognize this glory- is accomplished for us as readers by the POETRY that evokes god evoking life as his creation. The POETRY evokes the god evoking life, so the poetry is inseparable from the message. You need the poetry specifically to move beyond the discursive and rational, and to move beyond a conception of life as governed by laws. It is the poetry, and the book as a whole that teaches reverence for creation as such; that teaches the vulnerability of the individual and the finitude of man; that teaches the dignity of man in the face of both the suffering and the beauty of life. (For Miles, however, the poetry is not the crucial thing.)

7. The book never endorses the idea that human law is directly mandated by god. Law is of concern to man, not god, though god affirms that justice is our rightful concern.

8. I do not believe in "god" as a "spiritual" reality apart from life, as a law-maker, or as the name for the lawful or moral direction of the universe. In my view, "god" is what Wallace Stevens calls a "supreme fiction," invented by poetic geniuses to envision (certain aspects, realities, energies) in LIFE, to represent or dramatize them. This poetry BOTH makes the world meaningful, AND shows the limits of human meaning-making. (A both-and between necessary but opposing perspectives.) I try to take this poetry seriously: what kinds of questions are these poets asking and answering by way of their god? What is the impact of their poetry? (How are we shaped by their poetry to see and act?) I see scripture itself not as the literal word of god, but as profound poetry about life, making available to us aspects of life (and of our experience of life) that reason cannot reach or represent. I would resist making "god" (the word) an idol or a fetish, and instead imagine the word and concept as a metaphor. Rather than literalize god and complain about god is doing to us, consider what poets are doing with the word to express what about life. Imagine that we readers produce the meaning of the text by our interpretation, as if collaborating with the poet/author to make meaning, as if we complete the meaning-making process, just as god needs us to complete himself. The meaning is not independent of us, but produced by our readings.

9. Where does the Book of Job leave us, therefore? We are left with our sense of justice, and with our suffering. The Hebrew Bible, ending in Job, raises these questions: how shall we live? How do we define (and practice) justice? How do we make sense of life and of our suffering? And who is this 'we'? I see these as fundamentally POLITICAL (not only personal or existential) questions. Stories involving "gods" in relation to "men" are one way to address these questions. These stories are problematic insofar as they make us think that human laws are divinely sanctioned, and insofar as they make us think OUR one way of living is the ONLY way to live. But insofar as these stories teach a double perspective (god and man) that puts human agency in perspective, they can be immensely fruitful. For it was by the language of gods that we first articulated and acknowledged our finitude, our incompleteness, interdependence and mutual obligation, and in the Hebrew case, the immensely auspicious idea of living by our promises. Imagine "God" not so much as a discrete idea to believe or not, but as a poetic vision of life -and if you reject it, consider what poetic vision you offer instead!

From (Hebrew) tragedy to (Christian) redemption

Readings

* The Gospel of Matthew
* Elaine Pagels, The Gnostic Gospels (x)
* Paul, Romans & Corinthians

Discussion Questions

1. Most of all, don't forget that Jesus is a Hebrew, not a Christian. He is in the tradition of Hebrew prophets, but his followers also believe he is the "messiah" (anointed one, or king) promised by Isaiah, in the line of King David. Like previous prophets he objects to idolatry and injustice, to over-emphasis on ritual at the expense of how we live day-to-day. Like previous prophets he says we worship mammon rather than god. Like previous prophets (and later ones like Douglass and MLK) he says he stands with god and the marginalized -'the least of us'- against those claiming to be the chosen or blessed ones. But he also announces -what are the 'glad tidings'? Why does he speak in parables? We only see and hear Jesus through the words/texts of others, his apostles, written long after his death. Their 'gospels' have an agenda: what is it? Can we still separate a historical ("Hebrew") Jesus from subsequent "christian" interpretation?

2. How does Jesus REVISE the tradition he inherits? Which elements does he draw on, to reject which other elements?

3. Does he depict an ethically rational universe, in which god rewards the good and punishes the wicked?

4. What sort of God does Jesus invoke? (Beware of saying Jesus' god does not punish, because Matthew's Jesus, at least, depicts sinners burning eternally in hell; beware of saying his god is only loving, or that Jesus is only loving - I bring the sword, he also says. Please notice your expectations!) What does Jesus say his god wants or requires?

5. Does his god govern ALL human beings, or only his chosen people? What defines this "elect" for Jesus? Is it birth or "descent" i.e. ethnic origin via Abraham? Is it consent, i.e. whether they are circumcised or CHOOSE certain rituals, or profess their faith in god? Does Jesus open up the particularism of the Hebrew covenant to new adherents?

6. How does Jesus depict motivation for just conduct? How does he view fear or reward? How does he stand toward ritual piety? How are these a problem? How does he depict the internal (and divine) drive he calls "love"? Why is love the ONLY valid or effective basis for conduct? What elicits this capacity in us? (Recall Blake's passages about love vs punishment)

7. If Deuteronomy and the prophets imagine an ethical/moral subject, defined by "righteousness" as an internalized conscience, how does Jesus relate to this project?

8. With Jesus, is redemption still a collective project, or is it now individualized and internalized? (Where is "the kingdom of god" when? among whom?)

9. What are the "glad tidings" and good news that Jesus claims to bring?

10. Does Jesus advance the idea that god is incarnated in each of us -that we are not only made in god's image, and are not only god's children, but actually embody god in our capacity for love and faith? Again, "where" is the kingdom of god?

11. Does Jesus reject the idea of 'chosen people'? Is "the kingdom of god" open to ANYONE who —does or thinks what? Does or avows what? Does he offer a "new" covenant to create a new community?

12. Has Jesus given up the earthly for the sake of a "beyond" after death? Again, what and where is 'the kingdom of god'? after-life? other-worldly? inner-worldly but here and now? or is it this-worldly -i.e. in and of THIS world among us here and now?

13. Has jesus given up politics, i.e. the worldly fate of a particular community? Is he engaging or escaping worldly conflict about how to structure our lives together? Has he reduced politics to personal ethics?

14. Compare Matthew's Jesus to the Jesus in the Gnostic Gospels -what is the difference?

15. What is Paul's argument about law and ritual? what is the problem, and how/why is "faith" (in Jesus' resurrection!) an answer? What role does Paul give to "the jews"? How do his texts both displace and supersede them as the chosen people? what do you make of his claims?

Letter Ten: From Job to Jesus (in Matthew, Gnostics, and Paul)

1. Start with the fact that we only have interpretations of Jesus, and very little reliable information about his actual life, practices, and words. The gnostic gospels may indeed be more reliable in this regard than the canonized gospels. To interpret "Jesus" involves seeing the gap between the person and the representations, to see how Matthew and Paul are creating a fiction or myth by which to found a church.

2. Do the gospels abandon the position of the Job poet? Do the gospels make the universe ethically rational again, so that suffering is explained as the result of conduct?

(A) orthodox/christian interpretation uses the epilogue of Job to say that Job in fact is rewarded by god -i.e. job's innocence is vindicated, and that if he had been guilty, he would have been punished, unless he had admitted his sin and repented. By adding the epilogue, which vindicates Job's innocence and rewards him, Job becomes the image of the "suffering servant," whose suffering is cast as a TEST, and whose innocence is vindicated by a just god. In this way, the profound questions asked by the Job text are folded back into a theodicy that "justifies god" by making the world ethically rational.

(B) in Matthew's Gospel, the world is morally rational: good fruit comes only from a good tree: you know a tree by its fruit, which implies that consequences signal or "prove" the intentions of actors, i.e. that there are no unintended moral consequences, that good acts never have horrific effects. Matthew's Jesus has us focus on our INTENTIONS and immediate one-to-one CONDUCT and we are not to "worry" about consequences -god takes care of them. And we are to assume that god will do the just thing, though the order of the world may seem unjust and though god's purposes are not apparent to us. Indeed, we see here a providential history guided by a purposeful, omnipotent, perfectly just god, whose design of creation takes us from the fall -our fault, which creates a fallen world, so that all the injustice in the world is due to our 'original sin'- to Jesus being sent by god to redeem man's sins, and at once end the fallen world and begin the world over again. Here we see the god you expected in Genesis and Exodus: consistent and reliable, whose conduct is rational, and whose heaven and hell guarantee that the wicked will suffer and the good be rewarded.

Here you see a vision of the world in which an invisible spiritual reality is "behind" the apparent (i.e. visibly unjust) order of the world; this is "meta-physics" -literally a reality beyond nature- which Nietzsche later calls a "true world by which to devalue (but also endure) the actual one." What is devalued? Our willfulness, our creativity, our partiality, our carnality, our power, our mortality —all are linked to SIN. The depth, complexity, obscurity of our motivation is radically simplified and moralized by the dichotomy of good and evil, by the claim that a tree is known by its fruits. Contingency is erased by a teleology that sees every event or accident as serving a larger purpose or "end" that Jesus and apostles have announced, that we can know and believe will transpire, even if not in our own lifetimes. But in the meantime, the virtuous will go to heaven and the wicked to hell. Tragedy is eliminated: there is no tension between human purposes and divine purposes, for they ultimately harmonize; authorities may clash, but we know which we must choose; no tragic flaw or constitutive blindness brings us down; intentions and consequences are never in a paradoxical relationship, or at least we are not to worry about

consequences, but only about the purity of our intentions. Politics is irrevocably tied to SIN: conflict over scarce goods, conflict over differing goods we rank differently, disagreement about (what is) justice, all these are marks of our sinful nature.

So I would join "the devil's party" to celebrate what orthodox Christianity abhors- to celebrate contraries rather than impose dichotomies, to affirm contingency and waywardness of events, our uncertainty about what acts produce, our irreducible plurality and our differing views of what is good or valuable. Christianity and Nietzsche both emphasize the fact of human finitude -we are mortal, fallible, partial, willful, imaginative, aggressive- but they respond to it very differently: for one, sin, for the other, tied to our creativity and to our capacity to do good and create value.

2. Can we interpret Jesus differently than Matthew does? How does Matthew's Jesus compare to the Gnostics? Matthew's Jesus is about sin, repentance, forgiveness and redemption, but this Jesus also says judge not lest thou be judged, as if to shift from sin and punishment to self-forgiveness and self-acceptance. If we are not to even feel (adulterous) desire, and are to pluck out the wandering eye, though, that does not seem like self-acceptance and forgiveness. In moments Jesus says good conduct is not enough, we must be pure in feelings and desires, and then it seems that Jesus intensifies pressure to be pure, whereas at other moments he seems truly forgiving and accepting of our all-too-human nature. In that register, he encourages us to imitate the lilies of the field, who simply enjoy well being because they assume god will provide, as if Jesus abandons the entire apparatus of sin and shifts focus toward aliveness, basic gratitude for being. This Jesus is evoked in the gnostic gospels, which focus on illusion (e.g. the temporality of past and future, the language of sin, and the idea of a singular subject are all illusions) compared to an enlightenment that puts Jesus closer to Buddha. I am not sure how to reconcile these differences.

(A) The canonical gospels (and Paul) depict Jesus as a MEDIATOR -you get salvation THROUGH me, by faith IN me (especially in my resurrection, which signals your own.) For the gnostics, Blake and Emerson, Jesus is an example of an incarnation that is possible for any person. "God becomes as we are so that we may become as God is," Blake says. They consider Jesus as an exemplar, as exemplary. He exercises his authority not by teaching correct doctrine, but by the way he lives, by his practice of living. To teach not doctrine, but by example and practice is the central thing -he leads without imposing. His practice of life IS the "glad tidings" -a way to live by loving. By this interpretation, Jesus does not emphasize "sin" -such judgments are left to god- and he instead emphasizes (a) receptivity to the needs of others, (b) generosity of spirit toward the fallibility and precarious life that we all share, (c) refusal to be ruled by anxiety about the future, and (d) refusal to be ruled by rancor at injustice or our own suffering. This Jesus (the Jesus of Blake and Emerson) is not about sin and guilt, but about love and its healing power, about overcoming the will to judge, police, and punish. (This Jesus is an abolitionist.) This Jesus seeks the "kingdom of god" by doing God's will, i.e. to live by loving god and thy neighbor as thyself. This Jesus refuses worldly distinctions and hierarchies; this Jesus focuses on 'the least of us;' this jesus is radically democratic. This Jesus leaves the state to the side; he does not endow the state with authority, he recognizes its existence, but rather than fight directly against it, which would be futile, he organizes new bodies of agency, people who would live otherwise. This Jesus builds a parallel polis.

(B) what characterizes the kingdom of god, a kingdom ruled by god? Orthodox Christainity imagines it is heaven, a world beyond this fallen one. Gnostics imagine a "kingdom" in which there is (1) no worldly authority except people themselves as seekers; (2) to enter (or create) this kingdom, you must give up your money (and your love of money, status, power), must give up kings, i.e. such idols, though it is not clear whether the kingdom requires abandoning law and ritual; (3) to value the least of us, to see the world from that point of view, i.e. to value justice in that sense, to stand with the outcast or excluded in any community or situation; (4) To ACCEPT (i.e. to both acknowledge and yet also forgive our willfulness and partiality, by imagining a god who forgives. So this god requires people to struggle with their partiality and pride, but we cannot escape them, they constitute our human all-too human estate. That is why we are to value not only the least among us, but also the "sinners" -the publicans, the drunks and whores- never to imagine that WE are ABOVE such folks, but rather accept a humanness that ties us all together. Those who live by these commands will (5) focus on immediate conduct with whoever is encountered, respond to the need of the other -to what THEY need. For Jesus as for Socrates it is better to suffer injustice than inflict it, which also means overcoming, or trying to overcome, the will to punish, to exact revenge in the name of justice, to make others suffer for our injury, as if that would heal us, when such efforts only bind us to the past and our wounds. Only forgiveness of those who injure us can set us free from our wounds, from rancor at those we blame for those wounds, and from rancor at the past, which those wounds bind us to. In all these ways, the kingdom of god is here and now, at once an "internal" feeling ("kingdom") of aliveness and an 'external' or worldly community of shared practices.

(D) What do you value: what should you value? What is most WORTH valuing?
Socrates says: living in truth, i.e. by trying to discern the truth about reality, and by living justly, i.e. by trying to discern and give "each thing its due." For Socrates that meant living "philosophically," by ongoing questioning of what we assume and believe, of our "opinions" or doxa about each entity (human or otherwise) and what action is appropriate toward it. For the Hebrews, "justice" becomes the highest value, and the tradition of prophecy focuses especially on motivation, orientation, and practice in ways that Jesus takes up and intensifies. I want to leave open or unresolved the question of whether he "fulfills" OR "abolishes" the law - I want to say both-and. "It is written but I say unto you" suggests that ambiguity, because he carries the commands further, but in a way, he claims, that honors their real or true meaning (which is love god and love the neighbor as thyself.) Some Jews saw him as fulfilling the law, carrying on prophetic critique, and others saw him as destroying the tradition. (The Sadducees, invested in the Temple and ritual, opposed him; but "I say unto you" could evoke "the oral torah" that the Pharisees defended from the literalism of the priests. But Matthew's Jesus also opposes the teachings of "Pharisees" and gives "Pharisee" forever after a bad name, though they actually defended an open-ended hermeneutic tradition of interpretation that produced talmudic/rabbinic Judaism. (Many called Jesus a rabbi, as if in the spirit of the Pharisees, so we simply don't know how the actual historical Jesus related to them.) Moreover, when he says "it is written but I say unto you" and when he says leave your mother and father, he calls back to the Abramite move of departure, exodus - leave the house of the fathers, create new chosen bonds with others, by living in a new way, by living otherwise. When a tradition is founded by an act of rebellion, what it means to honor a tradition is constitutively ambiguous, as Frederick Douglass also argues in the American case.

(E) But what has happened to a worldly political community? The conventional political theory view of Jesus is that he shifts focus from worldly redemption of the whole community, to INDIVIDUAL salvation, from the worldly redemption (freeing) of a historical community to "inner-worldly" and "other-worldly" forms of salvation in the next life. The kingdom of god is INSIDE us, or it is BEYOND history. In addition and in contrast to these interpretations, I have interpreted Jesus as offering a this-worldly practice initiating a this-worldly community; and he was indeed seen by many Hebrews as a new David come to free the people from Roman rule. Still, the ruling interpretation of Jesus (since Paul) is the inner and other worldly, not "political." Partly, he does not articulate an idea of collective responsibility, that each is responsible for the fate of the whole or that people are co-authors of that fate; rather, he depicts one-on-one (ethical) conduct. Hebrews had already individuated responsibility -you personally are responsible for the fate of the whole and of each/all who comprise it- but Jesus seems to lose that sense of the whole, as he focuses on the absolute demand of facing the other in the ethical encounter. Partly, he does not articulate an idea of the political in the sense of people collectively deciding their constitutive practices or making fate-ful choices. Partly, he does not articulate an idea of the political in the sense that people collectively make decisive commitments that create aggressive relations with adversaries -e.g. romans, states, the ruling class. Still, though, he says: I bring not peace but the sword. Let us not forget that he throws the moneylenders out of the temple. He does not avoid conflict, he insists on intensifying it. He says, I come to fulfill not destroy the law, but he also says, leave your parents, reject your priests, re-orient who you identify with and on what basis.

3. Paul:

A. Whereas Exodus says, we have OUR god and you have YOUR gods, Paul depicts ONE TRUE GOD, and asks whether people worship that god, and whether they worship that god correctly. There is now living by truth OR by illusion. (Whereas before there was plurality, our god and their gods as contrasting truths we live by.) Whereas Exodus says OUR law (the 10 commandments) Paul casts it as THE law, law as such.

B. The central methodology of Paul is absolute dichotomies, between:
the mortal flesh (the body) vs the immortal soul (the spirit)
the letter of the law vs the spirit of the law
the external ritual vs its "true" and internal meaning
the law vs faith
ethnic particularity (jews wed to the law) vs universalism
Jews as mere external practice vs Christians as its true spiritual meaning
the key rhetorical strategy is contrasting the literal and the figurative
(literal circumcision vs 'circumcision of the heart')

By this method Paul can say the "true" Jew is actually the Christian who does not take circumcision literally but figuratively, as a commitment to live by faith not by law or ethnic origin. Paul equates "the jew" with literal legalism, fetishized rituals, and ethnic narrowness, and abstracts from this object its true 'spiritual' meaning -a life of faith, like Abraham he says- leaving behind the literal jewish "shell," the "outward" manifestation of the spirit that Christians now embody. Those still bound to circumcision as an actual worldly ritual then commit idolatry,

mistaking the literal and the spiritual. To the degree that we insist that authenticity OPPOSES ritual, we are Pauline; if we say "external" and by that mean something OPPOSED to something "internal," we are Pauline. If we "the Jews" as a merely external, ritualistic, and legalistic community, compared to a spiritual and universal community "in christ," we repeat Paul's caricature of the Hebrew project, as if it did not care about justice, or the heart, or the spirit. The Hebrew project sought a dialectical tension between spirit and flesh, intention and consequence, justice and worldly well being, the heart and the law, but Paul insists this project failed and that god's blessing now passes to those who call themselves Christian, the new people "chosen" by god.

C. The law and ritual

1. The law cannot produce the motivation to fulfill it. Subjection to law produces not only our sense of sin, but our sinful desires and acts -if the law says, do not covet, we will feel and do covetousness. The law elicits the very desires and acts it prohibits. Prohibition is self-defeating. It creates a self divided in its will, unable or unwilling to do what it knows is best. Part of us is on strike - part of us is "truant." We are enslaved to the law; we feel both guilty and defeated by it. And within the terms of the law, we cannot overturn it because we fear chaos and sin. But law produces -it elicits or provokes by its prohibitions- the very impulses to transgress that law invokes to justify itself. No rules, no transgression; no rules no impulse to transgress would be elicited. To get over sin, therefore, we must get over the law; to get beyond the law-sin dialectic we must think about rules and desire differently and critically. We get over law if we view conduct not in terms of prohibition and command, but in terms of inward motivation, not in terms of carrots and sticks, but in terms of desire or care or love. If we act from love for another, we act willingly and unselfishly. Faith (in the power of love that is in us) would obviate both law and sin. "righteous" conduct too often or even typically comes from duty, dutifulness, from the super ego saying what you should do, but this 'command elicits a truant's refusal or resistance; then the truant is trapped between being dutiful/complaint and being defiant, both reactive positions, whereas the alternative is not being reactive at all, which is what 'love' tries to name.

2. Likewise, Paul argues that ritual acts are fundamentally self-sabotaging -in performing them, we end up invested in the literal act rather than its spiritual purpose, we mistake the "outward" or "external" performance for its inner meaning. So we become rigid or dutiful about Kosher, the Sabbath -or doing homework and seminar papers- but we "forget" or lose touch with the "spirit" behind the letter, the real purpose of the rule. Like law, ritual becomes an IDOL. For Paul, every structure of routine becomes enslaving, imprisoning, deadening, creating a divided subject invested in the "externals" of conduct in a conscientious or methodical way cut off from the 'spirit' the practice is supposed to engender or express. Radical democrats offer a similar critique of constitutional democracy -e.g. we vote or obey the law in the name of "democracy" (say "god") but people routinize the means, are alienated from its real meaning, which is making the rule we live by; focus on the letter of the law replaces rather than engenders the spirit of self-determination. The ROUTINE overwhelms the spiritual/political purposes it was to serve. This is an argument about what Marx called reification, or what prophets called idolatry. To "rupture" such reified practices, Paul (like Carl Schmitt later) declares an exception by putting "faith" over "works." You can see what is called the "antinomian" spirit here, anti-nomos, invoking inner light, faith, or inward authenticity to contest the legitimacy of law as command or

prohibition. (Quakers model this idea of a community oriented not by law or duty but by inward motion of members seeking consensus and enacting care for each other. For people raised in American individualism or Protestantism, Paul's arguments seem entirely plausible, and individualists will see any form of liturgical practice -Jewish or Islamic- as coercive, conformist, imprisoning. We invoke "faith" and internal authenticity. But if you talk to orthodox Jews and devout Muslims, they do not recognize themselves in Paul's description because they do not see letter and spirit (or ritual/law and faith) as antithetical, they join what Paul separated.

3. Paul is a splitter, he never credits how ritual can engender faith, how rituals can inculcate and engender essential dispositions of character. As Bonnie Honig argues through Rosenzweig, ritual practices can "prepare" people to exercise their own agency, and to appreciation the miraculous in life. (Imagine, the discipline of practicing the piano is the condition of self- expression, and we develop a sensibility for the musical that we otherwise cannot develop. Every discipline, involving repetition, can be justified as shaping our character and capacities.) But Paul lacks this dialectical sense, he sees dichotomies not contraries, law VS faith, not an ongoing tension in which one is a condition of and present in the other. He intends to polarize "Jewish" law (as merely external, alienated routine) and "Christian" faith as internal motion.) He would break apart what Moses and the prophets (and Jesus, who says he would fulfill not destroy the law?) would synthesize.

D. The second huge issue Paul raises concerns identification. He would forge a worldwide community of ex-jews and non-jews, who will call themselves the new chosen people to replace the Jews. Some Jews thus repudiated their old identification, and joined with non-jews, claiming that God has taken "the blessing" from the jews and passed it to them. This is called "super-session" -whereby the "new testament" is announced as replacing the "old testament" - and a new people become god's chosen people. This community is formed by abstracting from actual ethnic differences (greek, jew, roman) and claiming participation in an ostensibly universal "human" (not ethnic or national) identity. We leave ethnic particularities to join a new community that promises universality on the basis of acknowledging the ONE god and his son's resurrection. Paul thus DEVALUES any cultural/ethnic form of particularity. But when christians convert Rome, and christianity becomes imperial, it is violently imposed on 'heathens' and 'pagans' in the name of saving their souls, bringing them to the one god, truth, right way to live. The appearance of universality enacts the violent imposition of particularity, and once Christianity is aligned with states, that apparent universality justifies imperial conquest.

E. What are the costs/dangers in Paul?

A) He splits body and soul, perhaps the most profound error in human history, repeated by Plato. Compared to the Hebrew idea of mortal soul (the breath of god) that dies with the body, Paul's idea of an "immortal" soul allows for an entire meta-physics, a spirit world separate from the actual/material/apparent world. The world of the senses-linked to actual practices of ritual- is devalued, compared to a 'spiritual' world that is dis-embodied. It is to remedy this dis-embodiment, this split of spirit and flesh, that Marx and Nietzsche (and Freud) write.

B) His premise mis-characterizes the Jews and their tradition as practice of "works" only, not faith. This not only condemns the jews to literality and literalism, but it also misconstrues both

faith and works (i.e. practices.) It is here we see the origin of the idea that religion is about discrete individual "beliefs," is creedal -the Protestant idea, whereas historically "religion" was always communal, a shared culture, shared practices of worship and living. This makes any communal and ritualized practice illegitimate. Faith is then separated from material life, bodily or embodied practices, a split of faith/spirit and works/body that denies the actual inter-subjective constitution of both faith and practice.

C) the idea that law (and ritual) mean death and imprisonment means that our mortal/carnal life in culture is necessarily a death-in-life from which we need to be resurrected. The consequence is devaluation of the ordinary, the habitual, the routine -of culture in its DAILY PRACTICE- which is reduced to "works," merely external, compared to "faith." Of course our rituals (voting, July 4th, gestures of mutual respect) can lose meaning, become routinized or alienated; we can lose touch with their spirit or purpose, and so lose touch with our creative and critical capacities, which seem excluded from our routines. Such alienation can (and does) happen. This is Paul's truth. But what does it mean to imagine that a community is simply held together by "faith" and not by works or rituals or routine practices? The fantasy is of a community without power, inequality, and conflict, in which we are "members of one body" because we are all harmonized by sharing the same faith/god. As Paul quickly discovered -but never theorized- an actual congregation is always mired in conflict and disagreement -in what he hates -laws, rules, rivalry etc

D) the devaluation of tradition, of ethnic or political particularity, of what is inherited. As if any tradition or inheritance is imprisoning, compared to willful new commitments (acts of faith.) Again, Abraham and Moses show that willful commitment, but Moses seeks a way to sustain that sense of commitment and faith AS an ongoing tradition. Still, there are times and cases where people reach a kind of dead-end; they cannot find ways to renew historic commitments or traditions, which feel dead to them. In those moments we see figures like Paul, the splitter and revolutionary, repudiating and saying there is no more life here, we must begin anew.

E) You are acutely sensitive to how ethnic particularity is exclusive, and can be chauvinist or violent. You are likely to reject "america first" as well as "chosen people." If salvation comes only through Jewish law, then many can't be redeemed, but Paul claims that God sent Jesus (the Christ, the anointed one) to solve that problem, by opening salvation to non-jews. He wanted salvation for all. But this very idea of universalism is problematic in ways that Paul unwittingly demonstrates. Every universalism bespeaks particularity -because universalism always must be embodied by someone claiming to bear it. But universalists typically disavow that particularity -e.g. "the Jew" - which they claim to entirely leave behind, as if Christianity was not itself another form of particularity. Every universality is built on what it abstracts from, and every universality leaves a remainder. "The Jew" becomes the remainder in European civilization, the figure of what does not fit civilization: "the jew" is narrowly self-interested, exclusive and exclusionary, devoted to money and practical need; they are exploitative, untrustworthy, vulgar, sexual, immoral. We must abstract from everything they represent -the body, the ethnic culture, the specific tradition- if we are to achieve universality of spirit (and be neither male or female, jew or greek, say black or white.) The stubborn attachment of "the jews" to their particular way of life obstructs, threatens, or undermines every form of wider ostensibly "universal" community. But giving up universality is also problematic. If we do not aspire to something

beyond ourselves, to something greater, what are we? If we do not in some sense "overcome" ourselves on behalf of something greater or better, what are we?

F) the idea of history as stages in which the earlier moment "contains" the later, and the earlier moment is merely a prelude to the later moment, which fulfills and supersedes it. Not only does Paul claim to know "the end" of history -its goal and its literal conclusion- but he therefore claims to know who is no longer relevant or important in that telos, except as a precursor. The promise that god lodged in the Hebrews will be fulfilled by others who are able to articulate it properly, to draw it out, the spirit from the letter.

G) For Nietzsche, Jesus represented a chance to break with the sin-guilt-punishment-redemption mechanism of priestly or Deuteronomic Judaism, to grasp life not in moral terms, but as a practice oriented around well-being and flourishing. For Nietzsche, though Paul speaks of faith vs works, he still restored the machinery of sin and redemption: Paul taught that Jesus died for our sins, and therefore that we can be redeemed from sin by our faith in Jesus' death and resurrection. For Nietzsche, Paul re-established DOCTRINE about Jesus' death, and thereby invented a meta-physical order (god's purposes "behind" history) to explain that death, and the result is that we lost Jesus' life, the example of how he practiced living, and he practiced being a teacher. He did not teach a doctrinal truth but rather exemplified, modelled, a way of life, and he taught that way of life by the force of his example, by how he lived. So we return here to the issue of authority -by example, not doctrine, so their authority as teacher is by example and we can emulate that example in our own lives. They exemplify a kind of personal authority that we ourselves can exercise by our own mimesis, which will set us free from inherited authority. The authority to decide how we live, and what we live for, is in our hands. But for Nietzsche, Paul replaces this totally democratic form of authority with doctrine, with orthodoxy.

H) here is an irony: Socrates is "remembered" by Plato, who appears to create an orthodoxy (call it "philosophy" in its "platonic" form), and likewise, the Biblical tradition and Jesus are "remembered" by Paul, who avowedly creates an orthodoxy (call it Christianity.) We need to go behind Paul and Plato, to discover a practice whose "truth" is not a doctrine to submit to or possess but a way of living -and a way of living that cannot be given a final or fixed form, a way of living that is betrayed by any claim to fixity.

I) it is important to develop a critical attitude toward internalization. On the one hand, by taking the law inside (as the superego or conscience) we become 'moral' agents responsible for our conduct -if we police ourselves, we don't need to be policed or coerced. We become "subjects" that can be held responsible, and hold each other accountable. We are proud of our conscience, which seems to enable us to stand against worldly authority, to make us autonomous. On the other hand, though, the idea of internalization is a problem: (1) we imagine that if we all internalized the same law, then there would be no power, no conflict, no politics; (2) we do not realize that this internalization is the social voice taken inside - we do not so much escape worldly authority as take it inside, make it our own, so it is no longer an alien force to attack, but our innermost voice of conscience. (3) to become such 'subjects' we declare war on many aspects of our being, and on those who we make to symbolize those impulses and qualities.

J) it seems impossible to separate Paul from the invention of race and racism, because the splitting of spirit and flesh, paralleling the splitting of reason and instinct/emotion, are always enacted by political and social differentiation. It is not a huge leap from ‘spirit’ to whiteness, produced by abjecting the flesh as stain, blackness. IN one regard, Paul proposes a universality against the differentiations of jews and greeks, male and female, but it is proposed by way of a ‘spirit’ imagined only through the splitting of being. Every subsequent appearance of the ‘human’ or the ‘universal’ thus bears this problematic logic, for what must be disavowed in order for the universal or the human to be?

Modernity I--The Idea of Secularization from Paul to Marx

Readings

* Karl Marx, excerpts (x)
* Nietzsche, excerpts from The Gay Science (x)
* Nietzsche, excerpts from Thus Spoke Zarathustra (x)
* Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals, 1st essay

Discussion Questions

1. Does Marx remain a "religious" thinker? Does he 'secularize' the redemptive promise and providential narrative of Christianity? In what does he avow faith?

2. What does Nietzsche mean by the "death of god"?

3. How does N's "Zarathustra" (an invented character) echo/parallel/overcome Moses or Jesus?

4. In N's parable called "metamorphosis,' how does he depict his own relationship to the biblical tradition he inherits? how does he reject it, revise it, affirm it?

Letter Eleven: from Paul to Marx

I. Paul Redux

A. Many of you are falling into a christian(ized) interpretation without realizing it: "ritual" is merely "external" and "habitual" (and therefore bad) while "internalization" is good because it means that people are really dedicated, committed, invested, in their "heart" as is said. There is much that is problematic about this interpretation. First, it assumes that the Hebrews were "merely"ritualistic and legalistic as an empirical matter, which is surely false, but also, theoretically, and it assumes that there is a radical disjunction between ritual and faith, and what we want is "belief" or faith rather than material practices (say ritual) that instantiate that belief. It is here we see the origin of the idea that "religion" is a matter of discrete beliefs, rather than a whole way of living. Once we separate faith or belief from material practices, and make one real and the other merely external, we have separated the soul from the body and created an agent whose conduct now emanates only from his belief -i.e. Paul's idea of living "by faith" rather than "by law." But this totally denies both the inter-subjective basis of human life and its basis in social practices.

What I would argue instead is that Jesus did echo Jeremiah who echoed Micah... etc, in seeing a tension between LAW (all the worldly rules we live by and apply) and whether people really "mean" it or "love" it. None of them thought it was possible to live without a worldly and inter-subjective web of rules -not even Jesus thought that. So, first, I am concerned that you not unconsciously repeat the anti-semitic (Pauline) claim about mechanical, legalistic, ritualistic Jews finally being reformed by the deeply feeling and loving critics who become Christians. Second, if you see a trajectory (from law to internalization) rather than a living tension, you misconceive how the world works, but you also leave politics -worldly things, res publica- behind. Partly, the fact is that conscience is social authority internalized, which means it is

always parasitic on external authority of parents and law. Partly, worldly life with others NECESSARILY involves conduct that is both ritualized and habitual, and worldly human life necessarily involves rules we live by and apply without much thought or commitment. But thirdly, by celebrating this internalization, we miss the problems with it. On the one hand, it involves a fantasy of a community without power, inequality, or conflict, in which all are harmonized because all share the same law. What has happened to the state? What has happened to the powerful, to those who (want to) dominate? On the other hand, internalization means subjection to the worldly authority that is taken inside. Remember, rather than attack the authority of god, the Hebrews must internalize it; or rather, they internalize it because they cannot attack it, and the aggression they cannot express against god (or Rome) is then turned against the self in ever-increasing demands for perfection. Those demands are impossible to satisfy, cruel, and fundamentally aggressive: cruelty against the self is one meaning of conscience if it is idealized; for virtue now requires not justice in our conduct but inner purity or purity of motive. We are proud of the conscience, we see in it the sign of self-direction, but we don't ask where it comes from. Yes, it can be a "ground" on which to criticize the state or the majority, as we see with figures like Jesus or Thoreau. We identify conscience with autonomy. But it is more complicated than that. We need to ask where it comes from. If it comes from worldly authority internalized, it also is aggression turned inward, and what does it demand of us (and then also, of neighbors and states)?
Consider the metaphor: what does it really mean to "circumcise the heart"? To circumcise the penis means to take a piece of flesh and give it to god, to signify reverence, to in some sense subordinate (or dedicate?) our sexuality to god. (This ritual is required before Yahweh becomes a god of justice, he is at first just OUR god, and fertility is his central power.) To circumcise the heart therefore means what? Does it mean (argue with me!) subordinating (or dedicating?) our interior lives to "god," which means -to justice? Does it mean a kind of purification? Does it mean sacrificing aggression or autonomy so we honor rather than disobey or rebel against god? Do we sacrifice our willfulness, and partiality? Maybe that is a good thing, the condition of being an adult, in a (moral) relation to others and a community. We are told to aspire to what GOD wants, not "thine own" imagination and desires, the prophets say over and over, that is, we should aspire to what is BEST for all, or what is truly just, rather than...what is narrowly selfish. Maybe this is good and necessary, but fundamental aspects of human beings are hereby consigned to "evil." When you circumcise your heart, you dedicate yourself to --—what? and you sacrifice in yourself —what? Rather than seeing a necessary or fruitful tension between ourselves and our god, do we 'cut out' whatever offends the moral demands of our god? Do we end up seeing "selfishness" as entirely bad, to be eliminated? Do we end up seeing "goodness" or virtue as entirely good, without any cost? To be aware of what we sacrifice, that might be one thing, but to celebrate internalization typically means celebrating conscientious self-regulation in the name of goodness, not ongoing tension or conflict or ambivalence. As Nietzsche argues, the idea of internalization (the invention of conscience as against law enforced by punishment) is a great advance, but every human achievement is also costly in ways we need to examine.

B. So in hearing stories of internalization I worry, partly, that we repeat an anti-semitic "tale." I want to emphasize, again and again, that Jesus does not say abandon the law, nor does he say that actual circumcision does not matter. He is holding on to the ritual life of a specific people, even as, yes, he repeats the classic prophetic concern that they over-invest in ritual and miss its purpose or point, which is justice. Likewise, we ourselves invest in the rituals of democracy

when we have long since lost sight of their meaning or purpose. But if I call people to re-animate their covenant, that would not mean, you no longer need to vote, or meet in organized bodies, or organize political parties, or exercise power through a state. You do not just need "faith." Reformers recall us to the meaning of our principles (or covenants), or call us to more deeply commit to those principle or covenants, but that still means or require worldly instantiations. Rather than read Moses as "external" and Jesus as "internal," therefore, I have been suggesting a kind of ongoing tension and argument, that begins with Moses and continues through Jesus. It is Paul, really, who turns that argument into a teleology, and that is how he hooks so many people, especially perhaps younger people now, who hate the alienation and externality of mediated institutional life and so fantasize of communities that are wholly voluntaristic, "faith-based," and harmonious -without having to really sustain any actual "congregations." Even a real congregation - as Paul quickly discovered- is mired in what he hates in Hebrews - laws, rules, inequality, and "the flesh."

C. So, beware of Paul, the move towards individualism and interiority is a move AWAY from politics, from the conditions of political community as well as organized political life. Hold onto the VALUE of particularity, of embodiment, and of "the flesh," and so even of "sin." Beware of those who read every "literal" act or promise as "really" spiritual, prefer instead those who refuse that split, who see souls in bodies, which die with bodies. No spirit world to separate from its material embodiment, but no material world without animation. The separation of these, of soul and body, of spirit and matter, is (in my view) an "original sin" from which every possible disaster follows. It is to HEAL this split that Marx and Nietzsche write. This split was never part of Hebrew religiosity, nor of Jesus's glad tidings, on the contrary. It is the signal invention of Paul. Of course we can find a "higher" principle in the law, and that meaning or spirit or purpose should guide how we live and apply and revise it. (The laws did not begin with that purpose, but we can over time come to see that purpose in them, and then more self-consciously revise them in accord with it, as both Lincoln and Marx argue.) But if we abstract the spirit (as the real) from the literal or letter (as the inauthentic) or if we abstract "faith" from its instantiation in ways of life or ritual, then we lose our ground in material life. By saying the spirit and faith alone were real and important, Paul devalued actual cultures and the whole of material life. What alone is "real" is not the visible, material world, nor our senses and bodily life, but our internal subjectivity and individual salvation.

I. Marx

A. Marx: xerox p. 60:
"Luther, without question overcame servitude through devotion but only by substituting servitude through conviction. He shattered the faith in authority by restoring the authority of faith. He transformed the priests into laymen by turning laymen into priests. He liberated man from external religiosity by making religiosity the innermost essence of man. He liberated the body from its chains because he fettered the heart with chains." i.e. he moved from "external authority" of rituals and laws (and so from literal circumcision) to "circumcision of the heart," which means implanting "the priest" and law INSIDE to "fetter the heart with chains." So Protestantism (read Paul) was not the solution but it posed the problem: it was no longer a question of "the layman's struggle against the priest outside himself, but of his struggle against his own internal priest, against is own priestly nature." Here is one bridge from Marx to

Nietzsche. What would it mean to struggle AGAINST our "own priestly nature?" Partly, not to assume we suffer because of our sins. Partly, as Nietzsche argues at the end of essay two in the GM, to turn against the bad conscience and to defend not only "the animal in man" but also the "artist in man," to defend BOTH our drives AND our artfulness. The task is not to destroy the conscience but to see and face and overcome 'the bad conscience' -endlessly internalized aggression in the name of goodness vs sin. The task is to rethink what we call sinful and how we address it, as well as what we call good, and how we understand practicing it. The task is to gain a truer autonomy by considering the unconscious mechanisms of self-punishment. What would a "good conscience" look like? how different than an 'inner priest" -what could it be?

B. Marx believes that, if people are to turn against "conditions that require illusion," they must overcome deference to worldly authority and to god, must claim the power to define and create they cede to god and to worldly authorities. They must be "Promethean" -rebel against the gods and reclaim their own powers, the powers they alienate -give over- when they imagine powerful gods and project their own power onto those gods. To do that, they must overcome their anxiety about that ("divine") power, about holding that power, and so about that responsibility. Is this to say, as Dostoevsky argued, that "if god does not exist, everything is permitted?" For Marx there is no umpire, no god to enforce rules of justice. Human beings CAN (and have) done every sort of evil magnified to the nth degree, so the question of what is "permitted" is wholly in our hands. That is where it always was, Marx says, but we could not admit that to ourselves. We have to step into that seat of authority. He thus refuses the inner-worldly and other-worldly forms of redemption offered by Paul, but Marx does depict an "internal" dimension to a politics that contests domination. Think of Moses calling slaves to overthrow an "egypt" that is partly inside them. Moses no more than Marx celebrate a golden calf; both want, not license but liberty & militancy. Both require faith in the possibility to create new possibilities. But Marx is a Moses who tells us that we ourselves embody god's power.

C. So it is crucial to hold on to Marx's sense that people are subject to institutions that they can (that they have the power to) reject. From prophetic critiques of Egypt and kingship to states and capitalism, Marx extends the sense that the "idolatry" of human power is a problem to address by organized action in concert. HERE is the reason we are suffering, Marx says, and he points at concentrated forms of economic and political power, not (as with Paul) some innate human sinfulness or (as with Jesus) some failure of ethical perfection. Marx thus restores the worldly redemption sought by the Hebrews, the project of plenitude in this life, on earth. Does he still imagine "circumcising the heart"? Well, we must embrace aggression if we are to challenge the powers that be, but we are also "social beings" who must live mindful of our global interdependence. We must embrace aggression to challenge domination but also embrace a sense of justice to justify our challenge. Marx says he does not want to "fetter the heart with chains," but he does want to engender and even intensify our sense of "social being." He wants a sense of virtue, so to speak, that does not involve sacrifice of our creative and aggressive energies. How does he think this is possible -especially given his aversion to what he calls 'utopian' thinking.

D. We also need to credit Marx's view of "religion" as a form of "self-consciousness," that is a form of self-consciousness about the human, and also "a protest against suffering and a sigh of the oppressed creature," advancing a critique of injustice, and endorsing standards of conduct that needed to be "realized" in secular forms. Marx believes he is "realizing" the truth IN

religious forms of human self-consciousness, drawing out of these forms their "real" meaning, which we can now become conscious of and actualize -both "realize" and make real. (Is Marx like Paul, drawing out of Hebrew tradition its real meaning, finally articulated by Christians who see it -like the philosophers who later see the real meaning in the Christian tradition?) On the other hand, he sees religion as a form of "consolation" that weds people TO their suffering and oppression, partly by depicting it as UNCHANGEABLE (due to human sinfulness) and partly by offering only inner-worldly and other-worldly forms of redemption. Marx wrote as an enlightenment scientist, though, who would interpret the true meaning of a dream from which he would awake us. So he says "the premise of all criticism is the criticism of religion" -his WAY of criticizing religion is the premise of every other kind of critique. On the one hand, to distinguish truth from ideology (to face with sober senses the true conditions of his existence, which means to face with sober senses how certain conditions give rise to illusions). On the other hand, to distinguish conscious mastery from alienation of power (because conditions of worldly alienation, in which we relinquish our power to nobles, kings, and states, give rise to and are reflected in the illusions-ideologies that imagine gods creating men.) So the two axes of Marx's thought are ideology-truth and alienation-power. Both axes have biblical origins in the idea of idolatry -of subjection to false gods vs living by the true (one) god.

E. But we need to see how Marx's redemptive logic justifies political revolt and yet at the same time devalues politics. (We see this if we keep Nietzsche in mind.)

1. First, Marx remains within a epistemological model of politics - the task is to move from illusions to truth, that is, from idols to the true god, and so from the idea of a true god to the idea of science as the truth replacing the illusion of theism. So politics remains organized as "political theology" - from living by god to living by THE TRUTH about human history. From the organizing idea of god to its secularized counterpart, we are to live by the organizing idea of truth. What follows when politics is organized by the idea that we either obey an objective truth, or we are living by bias, or illusion, or "ideology"? In Nietzsche's terms, Marx's theory devalues "the perspective optics of life," that is, the idea that human beings necessarily see through particular lenses or perspectives -that the world becomes VISIBLE to us only through a LENSE. So perspective is not the opposite of truth, because different aspects of the world do become visible to us from where we are situated and how we see. So "objectivity" cannot mean the ONE standpoint, the true objective outside god-like standpoint, for that standpoint is impossible for any human to inhabit. Objectivity can only mean multiplying perspectives on an object. For Nietzsche there is no ONE "objective" view, only a view that achieves impartiality because it includes multiple perspectives. We need to be able to VISIT those other perspectives. Marx does use the idea of perspective: the view of social life from the bottom is privileged epistemologically; those who are below and outside an order see it more clearly or fully than those "inside" it and its justificatory ideology. But he does not imagine the idea of MULTIPLE points of view. He replaces IDEOLOGY with TRUTH, whereas Nietzsche replaces the ideology of truth with a practice that affirms the inevitability and value of multiple perspectives. (We will talk about "relativism"...)

2. Second, Marx remains invested in an idea of universality he inherits from Judaeo-Christianity. Marx remains very concerned about "mere" particularity and narrow self-interest - the proletariat redeems its aggression because it protests "wrong in general" and speaks for a truly universal

good, i.e. the end of ALL classes and so of domination by class. It can't be just another class, replacing one form of domination by another, it really has to usher in an END of class domination. It has to be fully inclusive, and advance a truly universal good, what is best for HUMANITY. Is this very idea of universality a way into or away from politics? Is Marx imagining a world without friends and enemies? Without conflicts of interest and identity? Does the abolition of class mean the end of politics? So, even if he endorses a "revolutionary" politics, he does not endorse politics itself as an unavoidable and valuable aspect of life. Or, rather, he endorses a process of struggle whose literal end is not important, for what matters is struggle against domination, and in this sense he does not devalue politics. What do you think? Either way, we want to ask, what is his idea of humans as 'species-beings' (what is disavowed by this idea of a universal and a universal good) and what does it entail? (given both globalization and climate change is it appealing?)

3. Thirdly, Marx devalues politics because of his faith in a teleological history unfolding in stages of ever greater human self-consciousness and fulfillment. The result is that elements of contingency and uncertainty in politics are supplanted by a guaranteed outcome. Accordingly, Marx wants a crisis and expects its resolution, he depicts PROGRESS through conflict: he sees us fulfilling our longstanding dreams by becoming aware of them, we are on a path and we need to keep going. In contrast Nietzsche sees a crisis (of nihilism) but no guarantee of emerging from it. Marx writes about the laws of history, whereas Nietzsche writes a "genealogy" emphasizing the contingency of every event and every change, that is, that at every moment there are choices, options forgone, roads not taken; that the road Marx says "must" be taken in fact is not necessity.

Modernity II--The Idea of nihilism

Readings

* Nietzsche, Zarathustra, prologue, 3 metamorphoses, On Redemption
*Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals

Discussion Questions

1. What is the problem with internalization and the bad conscience? What does N mean when he says the bad conscience is an illness he would make a pregnancy?

2. What is the problem with "slave morality"? How is it costly? How does N use this idea to explain or interpret our "democratic" views of justice and morality?

3. In the third essay, how does N depict the problem of "nihilism" and what is his response? If the idea of truth has unmasked theism as an illusion, and then unmasked morality as a human invention, why is he turning against our unthinking piety toward (our faith in) the idea of truth? Why destroy the ideal of truth? Or, is he questioning OUR idea(l) of truth, but in the name of a truer understanding of the motives and limits of reason and knowledge? What is it about our version of truth -as the opposite of illusion, plurality, perspective, interestedness- that is so problematic? Why does he pose "art" as the best alternative to "truth" as an orienting ideal?

A) how does he understand "morality" and related to that the "internalization" ("the instinct of freedom turned inward") creating "the bad conscience"? What does he propose as an alternative? He says the bad conscience is "an illness, but as a pregnancy," -how does he make an illness into a pregnancy? a pregnancy bearing what possibility?

B) he says a-theists believe they have left religion behind, but in fact they demonstrate "the will to truth" and the "faith in an unconditional truth" that characterizes religion, which makes science (and its ideal of objective/unconditional truth) a translation/secularization of Christianity, not an alternative to it. If "science" is actually the shadow of Christianity, what is an alternative?

C) but what is the problem with science, the will to truth, or the ascetic ideal? Why is an alternative necessary? the problem with it, he says, is 'Nihilism,' but what is that? how does it develop? and, what is an alternative?

D) Nietzsche teaches perspectivalism as an alternative to the ideal of an absolute or objective or transcendent truth, because he thinks that getting at reality requires us to multiply perspectives rather than seek a transcendent point beyond or above them. Perspectives REVEAL (make visible) aspects of reality, though leave aspects in darkness. By teaching the 'perspective nature of life" what is the perspective he himself is offering? He remains committed to truth-telling -reality is comprised of perspectives- but what has changed?

Letter Twelve: Nietzsche and Political Theology

1. Secularization I

A. we plotted the path from Christianity, whose moral scheme entails the ideal of truth - BOTH of worshiping the ONE TRUE GOD, AND of being truthful with one's god and oneself. So we "confess" our sins, we seek out the "truth" of our motives, and we work to make sure we do not believe "illusions." we want a true god, not a false one. Marx lives entirely within this episteme. He no longer believes in god, or that morality is grounded in god's word, and he no longer believes in sin or guilt as categories, but he retains the idea that life should be organized by 'the (one, objectively correct) truth' rather than by illusions, should be organized by 'science' rather than 'ideology,' rather than by myths, as if these could be radically, clearly separated. The entire modern emphasis on science and expertise is an extension of the Christian priesthood, of the idea that there are those who really KNOW, and that they should govern our destiny, an idea that originates with Plato. Atheism, if it claims knowledge with the same certainty as theism -if it claims itself to be an unconditional truth, qua truth, not in any sense historical or shaped by human authors with motivations and contexts, is then a mirror of theism. Atheists replace one "truth" (vs illusion) with another truth (vs illusion) -and hold to the radical dichotomy between 'truth' and 'ideology' -religion being one and science offering the other. but can Nietzsche escape doing this?

B. For Nietzsche, Christianity fundamentally "devalues" the human condition, and it does so by inventing what it calls a true or real world of god's purposes in history and a beyond of heaven and hell. The actual world is devalued by this "true world." What is devalued? Appearances (as compared to a stable "reality" behind them); transience, becoming, change (as compared to god's eternity or the idea of Being, as if reality were substantial and solid and fixed); contingency, uncertainty, and chance compared to teleology or determinism; death (as a marker of finitude, compared to the denial of death that is the premise of Paul's theology); the necessary partiality of perspective (compared to the idea of an unconditional truth or a gods-eye view unlimited by human embodiment.) N also imagines plurality as part of our human condition because people are positioned differently in the world and experience it differently, and articulate its meaning differently. He imagines not just "the animal" in man, which we deny in the name of 'higher' moral values, but also the ARTIST in man, the creative, fiction-making creator of poetry, metaphor, supreme fictions. (Artists are always cast as evil or corrupt-- because they lie! They are deceitful and untrustworthy.) Lastly, he links creativity to aggression. He emphasizes aggression (too much!) but because we always disavow it by proclaiming our goodness, our altruism, in ways that deny the willful assertion in what we do. (Nietzsche cannot imagine love very well, or mutuality.) Assertion is not at all physical force, rather assertion is the vital energy (the 'life') of beings expressing themselves, persevering in their being. (But yes, he also emphasizes aggression as cruelty as if to throw in our faces our sense of our goodness, as if to show goodness giving the pleasure of superiority to those we help, as if to show how cruelty against myself is a condition of being 'self-less' toward others.) So Nietzsche does use a language of truth, inescapably, to depict certain "fundamental presuppositions of life," fundamental conditions of life that he says we must accept rather than deny, affirm as a condition of all our knowing and acting, rather than imagine getting "beyond" them. He does posit a human condition, an ontology, but it is the process of becoming itself, which he calls will to power, of life as the endless ('dionysian') movement of creation and destruction of forms. This is

his organizing truth, and he really believes this view grasps “actuality,” the fact of our embodiment in mortal, sensual, carnal bodies on earth.

C. But to see these facts says nothing about what they mean for us. They do not have inherent meaning. There is no one “true” interpretation or meaning of the ‘facts’ or realities (mortal bodies, transience, senses, etc) that he recovers or discloses. “Religion” is not exactly “false” as such -he celebrates how the GREEKS imagine THEIR gods- because THEIR gods (and tragedy) entail acknowledgment of rather than flight from what he calls the dionysian actuality of our mortal embodiment. I think he wants us to be “creative” again, creative like the ascetic priests once were, but this time to make a “meaning for the earth” rather than invent meaning as a “beyond.” He does not think all paradigms are equal; he is not a relativist, but the truth of a paradigm (Christianity vs Greek tragedy) cannot be his only criteria; he wants to see the kind of people, or character, and the kind of community it makes possible. Over and over he asks: Does it SERVE LIFE? Or HOW does it serve life? What capacities or ideals does it value? What powers does it engender? What possibilities? So he says that the Christian paradigm, the ascetic ideal, in fact “saved the will” by giving people a meaning to their suffering. They could “will” -choose, enact, embody - certain ideals and values, and by willing a beyond and the overcoming of their sinfulness, they made themselves “evil” and “interesting,” and developed a rich interior life -in the name of the true and the good. But people no longer (can) believe in this paradigm of a two-world metaphysic (the world of ‘mere appearances’ and “the flesh,” as compared to the real “spiritual” world beyond it) And he believes that the outcome of “willing nothingness rather than not will” is now being exposed - We had been willing a beyond (nothingness) and self-denial of the matter and senses and drives that we are (nothingness.) Nihilism or nothingness means willing abstractions without embodiment, willing unconditional truths or absolutes that do not and cannot exist for creatures such as us. And I think nothingness is connected to aggression against our humanity, to what in ourselves that we have called evil/sinful. So the will is “saved” by these fictions even as it is turned against “the fundamental pre-requisites” of life in the name of something “higher.” The result is that we have become complex, interesting, profound, self-critical, self-reflective, self-regulating, truth-telling creatures who at the same time seem at war with the fundamental conditions of human life. Can we now will something else? Can we will a meaning for the earth? Can we will our own lives on earth without transcendental sanction? (We hold these truths...) Can we tell stories, create fictions, make myths that affirm and value rather than deny or devalue these fundamental pre-requisites of life?

D. Is he therefore replacing one construct (theism) with another? Yes, sort of. We need a horizon, we need a mythic frame of some kind. But they are not equivalent or equally valid. First, the new construct will admit its human authorship; second, it will admit the possibility of other visions; third, it will affirm what the previous construct devalues or stigmatizes. There is nothing wrong with constructs, we require them to give shape to ourselves! The question is their relation to actuality and their impact, what sort of beings they shape, and how they serve life. We cannot believe certain stories any more, they are not true to/for us -god is dead- and we cannot affirm the kinds of character or dispositions they engender. But if we are still within ‘the ascetic ideal’ we are not able to create a new horizon because that involves myth-making. We are anti-theists in the name of ‘the truth,’ which means we remain within the episteme of will-to-truth, we deny the creative element we claim to value only the truth and nothing but the truth as if truths could be access without an optic or a poetry. We cannot see that every framework is a supreme fiction,

a creative poetry, a vision of the world. Until we displace the scientific paradigm, which remains the last gasp of the ascetic ideal, we will not be able to create a new kind of paradigm; we will not be able to access the "poetic genius" behind every religion. Only if we displace the god-term "truth" can we accept that every paradigm is humanly authored, by creators who are partial and motivated, and that other paradigms are possible even around the same central facts of life. (E.g. Greek tragedy sees the same things as existentialism, but one articulates its insights through capricious gods and the other through the idea of acting against the void.) To be creators again, not scientists who "discover" the truth, but creators who envision -Nietzsche says posit- the world anew -we must recover Blake, not Laclau. But poets will continue to be devalued until science is dethroned; science prevents the "firm persuasion" Blake calls poetic genius. Poets will seem to be creating "mere" fictions; it will not be seen how fictions (in language) are the way we humans tell (our) truths. So in a paradoxical or self-contradictory way, Nietzsche has to attack the "will to truth" (the lion must supplant the camel) because our investment in truth as the highest value stands in the way of creation (the child.) Nihilism in one aspect is the devaluation of values that follows as we realize that morality is not "true" as such; but nihilism is also the inability to posit (even moral) values because, from within the paradigm of the ascetic ideal, we can only posit or can only value what is unconditionally and universally true, true for all at all times and places as the only validity, and we now see that nothing is. If those are our criteria, no value will seem valid and we will be reduced to cynicism and expediency. Nietzsche wants us to be able to posit values again, on the basis of accepting that values are not-unconditional and not-universal; if we rally accepted that nothing is unconditional and universal, then this could not be a standard by which to say -you are merely biased or partial- or merely human, as if devalued. If we rejected that absolute as our standard for validity, then we can say -valid for ME, for US. OF COURSE partial and biased -what is not!!??- but OURS, and here is why - we can give reasons!! But if we are still in the shadow of the absolute, we cannot posit -here is my table of values - what is your's? To do that is take the bridge across nihilism, to become creators who bestow value again.

2. Secularization II - substitutes for theism:

A. Nietzsche depicts science as the "kernel" of the ascetic ideal rather than an alternative to it, not only because it is driven by "the will to truth" (though I think physics no longer is) but because of the form of life involved in "scientific labor," which requires the displacement of the I in the name of objectivity. Sin becomes bias. Holiness becomes objectivity, a state of purity, study untainted by subjectivity. (You are taught you cannot write papers using the word I. You have to speak in third person. Think of that as the very deepest kernel of Nietzsche's concern about what we must crucify to achieve moral or epistemological legitimacy.)

B. Nationalism is the biggest substitute for "god" and church. because nation is now the central and fundamental organizer of people's lives, not only their identity, but our lives in every way are organized around nation-states. A nation state is like a "church" or IS a church. What do we worship, what practices constitute us as a "congregation," or a we? Nationalism is above all a way to organize and direct ressentiment, to give it targets. We suffer because of THEM - those jews, say the Germans, or because of blacks, gays, immigrants or terrorists say white Americans. But also we make our membership a site of the sacred because as we sacrifice for the nation we endow it with meaning, we make it holy. Over and over Nietzsche says we do not mind

suffering, if we can find a purpose, and that purpose can bring new suffering, and we embrace that suffering, if it instantiates the sense of purpose that we above all crave. It is awful (and inspiring!) to think about what we embrace to find a purpose for suffering. I want to especially emphasize racism, ethno-nationalism, spreading across the world, as an instance of what Nietzsche fears will follow from the death of god -new forms of fundamentalism that try to re-establish the certainties once taken for granted. I would also emphasize here that Hitler is not a Nietzschean hero, but an object lesson in rancor, in a kind of leadership that turns rancor outward. Racism demonstrates what he calls 'weakness' not nobility because it is governed by rancor and blame.

C. modern mass democracy:

For Nietzsche, secularization means removing theism but keeping the same motivational structure intact. Partly human beings are "social beings" as Marx puts it and "herd animals" as Nietzsche puts. (Note the difference!! What is suggested by the rhetorical shift on the same object?) We require of ourselves to live together a certain regularity and reliability, just as we require grammar to speak and logic to think. A condition of that "sovereign" promise-maker is this training -this is the fruit of "herd existence," so again, Nietzsche is not simply for or against. But he is also critical of the form that social life takes. So he describes modern mass democracy as animated by the same fundamental valuations and motivations as Christianity. In this he agrees with Marx -whose says democracy "realizes" Christianity by making its values both secular, but N has an opposite judgment of the development. What is the problem with democracy? Marx says it offers only formal not real, social and material equality. Nietzsche imagines mass democracy means that (a) people, most of all, seek to achieve security and comfort, a reduction in suffering; (b) they do NOT put life under the category of sin and guilt, but under the categories of normal and deviant, as Foucault later argues. We still blame ourselves and work on ourselves to achieve normality, to escape being considered deviant, to disavow and penalize difference in others and in ourselves. He thus imagines equality interpreted as SAMENESS, so that we value conformity as if that were justice. he calls democrats "levellers," because they "level downward;" they hate any sign of difference or excellence as a kind of inequality and want to eliminate it, he says. That is because they interpret equality as an abstraction, the same rule applied to all, no differences can be marked or valued, that would be -discrimination or reverse discrimination. So on the one hand, suffering is still taken to be an indictment of life, and both individual effort and state action seeks to make life comfortable, safe, harmonious and productive (Foucault calls this bio-power.) On the other hand people engage in intense self-regulation in order to mold themselves to the image of the good, i.e. the normal. Not sin but normality, and intensive judgment for failing. Foucault, following Nietzsche, imagines the democratic age producing what each depicts as a "pastoral" state that acts in the name of the happiness and well-being of the whole. So what's wrong with that? For Nietzsche and for Foucault the problem is that life is increasingly "managed," and less and less do people embrace the struggle to define their OWN meaning in life. Less and less do they accept the necessary element of struggle in life; they run away from the experience of solitude, and so also from responsibility in the existential(ist) sense of making a life in the face of their imminent death. Our food -pop culture, media culture- is all pre-digested; culture is formulaic, and people welcome paths and norms laid out for them. (But you chose Gallatin, to make your OWN concentration -you are Nietzscheans whose interdisciplinarity multiplies perspectives.) So

Nietzsche associates “democracy” with what he calls the last or final man -a figure who no longer values suffering or conflict or struggle - who no longer has the intensity we find in moses or jesus or paul, no longer involved in a project of self-overcoming. This creature wants ease and comfort, this creature “blinks” when asked central questions about what (our) life is for.
My analogy is that democracy for Nietzsche is the human world disclosed in the Disney movie Wall-e. He at moments sounds nostalgic for the priests who struggled, who enacted heroic kinds of self-overcoming, compared to this reduction to comfort and ease and immediate gratification. There is no goal other than more of the same. This is another kind of nihilism.

3. So what are we left with after the critique of the ascetic ideal and the will to truth? How does he want us to live? (1) the world is not designed for us, it has no inherent purpose or meaning- so what are we going to make of it? we are left with the sense that we are complex, creatures, obscure to ourselves, riven by many different drives and impulses, with no natural form; any social form we take, any norm we are organized by, won’t fit all that we are. He leaves us both with what Phillip Roth calls “the human stain” -our ineradicable, carnal bodily reality, and also with our willful perseverance in being, and he leaves us feeling how little of this is conscious, how little we actually know or are conscious of, let alone master of. And we are excessive beings; there is always an excess of life over form, both personally and collectively. There is excess, there are remainders, we tend to pathologize them but now we can see them differently, as remainders, what does not fit a norm, not sins or inherent failures. We are never at one with any norm, any shape, any form. We are characterized by fragments and dissonance and drives that do not harmonize automatically that may be contradictory. We do require a form or discipline, shaping/cultural practices to become subjects (and subjects proud of our capacity to make and keep promises) but we are always at odds with any form or discipline installed within us, that we would like to inhabit perfectly. We must be artists to give shape to the chaos that we are as it were by nature. So we are left with the animal-in-man, and, what Blake calls poetic genius -Nietzsche says creator and artist- in man. So (2) we are left with aggression and art: we must a kind of aggression against ourselves to shape ourselves (any discipline, we ‘make’ ourselves practice the piano or lift weights, we struggle against the impulses otherwise.) We struggle to control our impulses to harm others, to assert our will at their expense. We feel that willfulness. We have to come to terms with it, to face it and own it, and rather than stigmatize it as ‘sin,’ or disclaim it while acting it out covertly; we need to be open about the actuality of having a will. (3), therefore, we are left to face what feelings lurk behind the mask of morality. We are left with experiences of sentience and “weakness” and so with the challenge of struggling against ressentiment, and the conduct, practices, ideas shaped by it. When is our justice a form of revenge? When are claims to equality motivated by envy? (4) we are left with “will to power” as creative re-interpretation of ideas and practices, and as the invention of new ideas and practices. (5) we are left with what he calls “the problem of the meaning” of our suffering. We need to imagine meaning-making in ways that (a) recognize human authorship and (b) welcome the fact that others can/will make meaning differently than we do. To live “by art” is to recognize that there are many ways to live, many forms of life, many meanings to give life, and “art” names that creative process of poesis, of meaning-making and self-fashioning. We do not try to get the world under the banner of one god, one truth, one way. That idea of truth or of ONE right way is the shadow left by the death of god; the alternative is to come into our own fraught and terrifying responsibility, living east of eden, by our poesis. (6) we are left with plurality, here is my table of values, what is your’s? But the great and under-appreciated insight of Nietzsche is that this

question is not just creedal -as if to SAY a value suffices - for Nietzsche, “value” is a verb, so the question is also, how do you LIVE (activate, practice, as a verb) the values you profess as nouns.

My summary: Nietzsche belongs in a course on ‘political theology’ because:
a) he accepts the premise that we live by faith and he articulates a practice of spirituality by which we practice our embodied being
b) he offers on ontology of life-as-dionysian -as the vital energy that at once animates, disturbs, and exceeds embodied beings - as compared to an ontology entailed by a providential god guiding nature and humanity.
c) that ontology makes form-giving -poesis- essential and necessary because human beings have no necessary or divinely authorized form for subjectivity or social life. That is the meaning of Nietzsche’s juxtaposition of the dionysian and apollonian, as the latter is associated with the realm of appearances, the creation of boundaries, the formation subjects responsible for justice. Nietzsche’s ontology is closer to the Job poet’s ontology, making justice at once necessary and unnatural, a human aspiration that is essential for us but not supported by the universe. Nietzsche thus juxtaposes energy and art-as-form-giving, which is to say he proposes thinking about what Freud called sublimation - how to put energy into forms of justice and beauty, into work and relations that are not natural to us, but a second nature that must be fashioned and sustained. Accordingly
d) Nietzsche’s political theology emphasizes both the necessity and failure of any humanly crafted form, the ways in which we must give ourselves a form, but we can never ‘fit’ it perfectly, which means that we are always at odds with the world we make, never at home with it, never at one with ourselves. What do I mean by ‘form’ or ‘forms’ - I mean “kinds of” and “practices” of kinship, subjectivity, labor, sacred ritual, sports, arts, politics.
e) Nietzsche’s ‘spirituality’ is a practice of acknowledging and feeling, and thereby learning to live with, these conflicts or dissonances - to see complexity, ambiguity, and ambivalence. The ‘stronger’ or ‘higher’ spirituality is distinguished by the degree to which we can do this.
f) If Nietzsche were to replace one dogmatism with another, he would himself be playing the role of ascetic priest, rescuing us from the problem of form-giving (art) and of meaning-making (what is the meaning/purpose of our suffering.). He would be disappearing (as if to resolve) the problem of assessing the value of our values. He wants <u>us</u> to inhabit these problems. He therefore must exercise authority differently than the priest, even as he tries to explain and diagnose the priest (or scientist or demagogic leader.) In terms of political theology, he may replace one ontology with another, but he has to do so in a way that allows YOU to SEE these fate-ful choices and conceive your OWN understanding - your table of values and the world-view it presupposes. In this sense he is in the tradition of Jesus, teaching by parable, and of Socrates, teaching by dialogic exchange. He does not so much answer or resolve the question of authority inhabit it, by exercising his authority as an author/thinker in ways that seek our freedom, that allow us to establish our own authority as readers, form-givers, meaning-makers.

Modernity III: Facism, Freud, and feminism

Readings

* Carl Schorske, essays on Freud
* Jonathan Lear, “The Shrink is In”
* Sigmund Freud, Moses and Monotheism
* Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women” (x)

Discussion Questions

1. How does Freud retell the story of exodus - what does he sees as its meaning and significance? How does ,he explain Moses not entering the Promised Land? How does he explain the grip of the ethical vision inscribed in the 10 Commandments? what does it triumph over, and what threatens this ‘ethical’ achievement? (Remember, he is writing at the precipice of fascism.)

2. Assess Schorske's story about Freud's two Egyptian digs - about Freud's discovery of and yet also ambivalence about the instinctual, the maternal and the androgynous. why does Freud need and what does he gain from this historical legacy and these layers in the psyche? Why does he give up the project of reconciling paternal and the maternal legacies and gods? why split them as enemies?

3. How does Lear's account of Sophocles, tragedy & psychoanalysis help you think about Nietzsche, Freud, and the Bible,? (the key idea: tragedy and psychoanalysis chasten rationalism and fantasies of sovereignty by acknowledging the reality of forces beyond our knowing and our control.)

4. How do Schorske and/or Lear help you think about GENDER in the bible & commentary on it? In what senses is the biblical text, organized as stories of fathers and sons, a ‘patriarchal’ framework and narrative, and how is that a problem for women -and for men? Does the text stipulate the properly feminine and properly masculine - does it define and produce gender? Does the text produce hetero-normative kinship and prohibit both same-sex desire and non-procreative sexuality? Are there voices, moments, idioms in the biblical texts that work against it?

5. Why does Gayle Rubin insist that feminism needs psychoanalytic theory? How does her retelling of Freud help you rethink/retell the biblical narrative of fathers and sons, the rules of gender and sex it authorizes, the form of kinship it installs, the logic of descent it enacts ?

6. Do these texts give you any language for thinking about the appeal of Trump and the motivations of his supporters?

Letter Thirteen: Freud

Freud is later than Marx and Nietzsche. 1856-1939 - Neither marx nor nietzsche made it into the 20th century, neither witnessed the first world war, let alone the advent of fascism. but like them, Freud emerged in an intensely phobic Victorian culture, in Austria, phobic about sex and about

Jews, and common anti-semitic stereotypes depicted jews as both money-hungry and sexually voracious - i.e. as driven by desire, appetite, instinct - and as narrowly self-regarding, exclusivist rather than spiritual and universal like Christianity. Jews were racialized; assimilated jews, who were not devout were nevertheless "jews" with certain ascribed characteristics. at issue was not 'judaism' but 'the jew.' Not unlike the meaning of blackness in American culture, "jew" was linked to the lower, the darker, the instinctual, the mysterious, the non-west, though unlike 'the black' in the U.S. 'the jew' in Europe was linked to capitalism (money-making) and not only to communism (the break-down of all distinctions in the name of equality.)

Like Nietzsche, Freud is trying to understand both the origin of culture, and the shaping of the self in their historical, social/political, and interior dimensions. Like Nietzsche, Freud invents his theory by analyzing himself - his own history and dreams - and like Nietzsche, he thinks this analysis tells important but long disavowed truths about Europe. Like Nietzsche, Freud is critical of the enlightenment idea that we can master life by reason, and his ontology depicts human beings embedded in unconscious and enigmatic forces that we deny at our peril. (Thus does Lear see a deep connection between Sophocles' tragedy and Freud's psychoanalysis.) Why are we reading Freud -who like Marx calls religion an 'illusion'- in a political theology class? Because he is (like Marx and Nietzsche) one of the greatest commentators on the biblical story, and on the civilizational significance of the Judeo-Christian project. Fundamentally he sees the Hebrews/Jews inventing an abstract god, set apart from any sensed and material object, demanding ethical conduct from subjects conceived as responsible for their own actions. this religion refuses the golden calf and lives instead by law and covenant, by ethical demands, self-control, and accountability. For Freud, this is the essence of the modern enlightenment, of a civilization endorsing a form of life organized by reason-giving and an ethics of individual responsibility, which in turn entail a form of 'liberalism' politically.. Freud thus makes the Jews central to a European civilization that sees them as marginal, humiliated subject people, bound to superstitious prejudices, weird liturgies, and at the same time bound to their desire for sex and money. In this way, Freud stood on the side of the 'enlightenment project;' in many regards he extended it into a study of the unknown and instinctual forces he called the unconscious, and the idea of a talking therapy itself enacted the idea of 'making conscious' what had been unknown or disavowed. the 'making conscious' is also his bridge to Marx - as in Marx's Letter to Ruge, when Marx uses the metaphor of dream to say, don't dismiss our dreams, but take them seriously, interpret their latent meaning so we can become 'conscious of' and 'realize' what we have always been dreaming of. Freud thus seems to stand on the side of reason and consciousness, to extend their reach and power in the name of expanding human freedom, our choice-making capacity, instead of 'acting out' unconscious forces.
BUT

Freud was also a critic of a civilization that is sexually phobic, that disavows how the mind is embedded in the body, and that denies the realm of unconscious meanings. He argues that human beings are driven by unconscious meanings - powerful fantasies, motivations, and 'drives' of which we are unconscious. 'triebe' is the same word that Nietzsche uses, that is badly translated as 'instinct' because tribe includes 'meaning' and 'symbol' in what 'drives' us. Until psychoanalysis, only "poets" (tragedians and biblical authors) have acknowledged this other realm. Freud (like Nietzsche, like the Job poet, like the authors of Genesis) insists that human beings (and life) is complex, enigmatic, and dark, at once entwining the erotic and the aggressive. erotic not only literally, but like plato, all human life is organized by "love" -libidinal

attachment - people "love" not only particular others, but money, power, institutions, nations, etc. Freud sees human beings as 'driven' by their desires, and their fantasies about these objects or others. But his world denied any unconscious drives and meanings. Victorian era subjects had internalized powerful injunctions or prohibitions against sexual desire, and against willfulness itself. These injunctions (internalized as the 'over-I' or 'super-ego') required renunciation of fantasy and desire, also of 'selfishness,' but desire and willfulness persists unconsciously even if our conscious conduct is regulated. Because people cannot admit the reality of what is prohibited by their culture and repressed from their consciousness, they develop physical symptoms instead -neurosis- and of course they also continue to dream. Freud creates a practice of interpretation by which the body can be interpreted as speaking (as symptoms communicate) and people can become more conscious of the conflicts between their actual wishes and desires, and the Victorian social demands they have also internalized, between their actual drives, and their own wishes to be (not only seem) normal, between what may feel shameful or transgressive, hard to admit to, and their wish to be loved by parents, esteemed by peers etc..

In this regard, Freud took the side of the "id" (meaning the it, our unconscious fantasies and desires) AND "the ego," allying them against the culture's overly restrictive, killing demands, against the ever-mounting but unconscious guilt that people felt over their wishes/desires. (Their good conduct actually intensified their forbidden wishes, which in turn intensified their guilt.) Every act of renunciation turns against the self an aggression that could be expressed against a repressive world. All the aggression that could be expressed outwardly fuels the super-ego, which Freud calls a citadel in a conquered city. The super-ego was not so much the explicit agency we call "conscience" -which we experience when we consciously feel remorse or regret about an action- as the unconscious agency that punishes us for the wishes and desires that we are not conscious of. What we actually have done creates conscious 'remorse,' he says, but the "guilt" we feel is mostly unconscious, over wishes and impulses we are not even conscious of. 'therapy' is meant to allow this conflict (between social demand and wish/fantasy/drive) to become more manifest, so that 'the ego' (the "I") can actually make some choices about their conduct and goals that, choices that involve a critical distance from the culture, but also from the wishes and drives the ego mediates.

At the outset of his first great book "the interpretation of dreams," he thus said "If I cannot bend the higher powers, I will stir up the lower ones." political resistance to authority, and the defense of eros or desire, were joined by Freud, in the name of expanding people's conscious autonomy about their choices and goals. BUT, as fascism emerged Freud became incredibly anxious about "instinct" in conflict with rational control. He identifies with MOSES (and indeed AS a Moses, the founder of psychoanalysis) against "the return of the repressed." He identified reason, control and LAW with the MASCULINE and the PATERNAL, and he identified "instinct" with the feminine and the MATERNAL. He saw fascism as a 'regression' to the maternal, to the golden calf, to instinctual release saturated with aggression. Freud's thought is thus deeply gendered in ways that Schorske identifies beautifully. By his death in 1939, Freud came to depict and endorse a split between the ethical and the instinctual, a split between the ethical (demanding <u>renunciation</u>) and the instinctual (allowing <u>regression</u>.) He no longer stood on the side of the ego and desire (libido) against the super-ego and its relentlessly unreasonable and escalating demands. Rather than seek a kind of healing and reconciliation, he identified with the angry moses, breaking the tablets of the law as he witnessed people worshiping the golden calf. Fearing regression and aggression, he depicted profound antagonism between "law" and "ethics" on the one hand and "instinct" on the other hand. His fear of what any relaxation of

self-control would mean -especially in regard to aggression- drove him toward endorsing 'repression' by 'the law' and its internalization in/as the super-ego, a project that constantly generates the fear that repression will break down.

Freud was thus deeply ambivalent in his evaluation of the psychic and cultural economy, of the relation between eros and aggression, of the role of internalization and repression -a set of issues impossible to separate from a political context of fascism and war. He began with the goal of "stirring up" the lower powers realm to contest the repressions demanded by the higher powers. he wanted to align unconscious drives and conscious ego (we become aware of our real desires, we avow and claim them, we enact them, we gain liberation or satisfaction, just as Marx had argued) -and this also meant to free women from patriarchal control. But he was also ambivalent about this project, especially as fascism emerged. Feminists were already arguing (see Virginia Woolf, 3 Guineas) that fascism was actually an effort to reassert paternal control over a world seen to be out of control, a project to protect MEN against being engulfed by powers and forces they gendered female. (The truth of the feminist argument, I would say, is manifest in the performance of Trump and support for him.) Those calling for a 'return to normality' or to 'norms' or to law are in many ways echoing the conservative side of Freud. But the feminist response is that normality as laws and norms (as Moses) is in fact the problem, because paternal rule, demanding renunciation of pleasure, always generates and increases rage and rancor -and wishes for release represented by the golden calf. the early Freud, like feminism, argue that justice (for women) and libidinal satisfaction (for all) need to be linked by overturning exclusively patriarchal kinship regime.

How then is this 'political theology'? Because we see the repetition of the fundamental biblical narrative of law and morality being threatened by regression to golden calf worship/return to egypt/despotism. Because the question of how we conceive and practice labor, kinship/gender, and rule is the 'politics' in every form of faith or theology. Because at the center of biblical theology and its afterlives is the question of libido and motivation -what do people really desire or love - dependence? Punishment? Domination? Mere survival? Well-being? Flourishing? Because at the center of biblical theology and its afterlives is the question of meaning, of the symbolic order we live within -how do we represent the elemental forces of life, envision the world, narrate temporality and history, conceive the human estate?

However critical we may be of Freud's answers to these questions, they are the questions posed by political theology. And I want to say that these questions -of motivation and meaning- are crucial to understanding historical fascism, or the aspirational fascism of Donald Trump. We have to ask what people are desiring or seeking in their attachment to such figures, and in their aggression against those they mark as different and threatening. To understand fascism, we need to attend to the drives and fantasies that shape our interior life, and to the symbols and images by which we make sense of the world. Historically, it was biblical theology, in its Hebrew form and in Christian after life, that offered metaphors, images, and narratives to explain human motivation and conduct, life's vicissitudes, and our suffering. Arguments about human sinfulness (or stiff-neckedness) and about our tendency toward idolatry, are a profound way to make visible and conceive what we desire and fantasize, why and how we create relations of domination and dependence, why and how we invest meaning, and what alternative practices and investments might offer a truer, more real redemption. In modernity, Freud inherited just these concerns -with how we conceive and endure the vicissitudes of life, how we understand motivation and regulate

conduct, how we make our suffering meaningful- and psychoanalytic theory has been the only OTHER noteworthy alternative to the otherwise reigning power of rationalistic thinking (in science, in liberalism, or in marxism) each presuming rational subjects pursuing self-evident self-interest. Neither offered a language to understand fantasy and imagination, desire and its investments, the power of narrative, and therefore, our capacities for mis-recognition and self-defeat, and for domination and destruction.

what to ‘take’ from the readings by/on Freud:
1) like tragedy and the Bible, we see the idea of drives, desires, and fantasies (inside) and of powerful forces (in nature, outside) that we are not conscious of but that shape and direct our conscious thought and action. we see the idea that we enact or repeat historical patterns for reasons we do not understand. Every great political theory tries to make us conscious of what is going on behind our backs, driving our ideas and conduct in 'unconscious' ways. THAT general idea takes specific form in Freud's idea of "the" unconscious, i.e. that human animals are split subjects, split between consciousness and practical reason, and, 'repressed' feelings, impulses, fantasies, wishes, typically erotic and/or aggressive. (nietzsche sees 'domesticated' animals, who undergo 'internalization,' as split subjects also. 'we men of knowledge,' we don't know ourselves, he says - beginning with Oedipus, famous for his practical reason, and able to solve the riddle of the sphinx - what walks on 4 legs, then 2, then 3 -and he answers 'man' i.e. in general -but he has no idea who HE is. we MIS-recognize ourselves, we are never who we think we are, and if we feel confident we are even more likely to be mistaken. we are not just fallible as in ignorant, but willful as in engaged in acts of disavowal or denial. sophocles through the Job poet to freud is the tradition of tragedy, seeing depth, complexity, and darkness, where secularists tend to see simplicity, transparency, and progress in their faith in reason. Freud is of course a secularist who believes in reason, but of a very special sort, since it has to outwit our genius for misrecognizing, denying, forgetting, and splitting.

2. imagine Sophocles depicting Athens as an Oedipus; imagine the U.S. as an Oedipus. we believe in our sovereignty, in self-made men, in our capacity to define our lives on our own terms, in our autonomy, our practical reason and ingenuity. we are masters of our destiny. we are not controlled by the past - that is old world - we are new world. Imagine the U.S. as Oedipus - driven toward self-destruction by refusing to acknowledge the power of the past and that we cannot escape it but must come to terms with it. Only by giving up escape and facing it can we gain any kind of freedom in relation to the patterns it has dictated. What Nietzsche calls ‘amore fati’ is this turning -to face, accept the past that has constituted us, but thereby to make that past and who we are now, a point of departure, for acting otherwise. That is the fundamental premise of psychoanalytic theory and practice - not only that we enact unconscious wishes and drives to discover, face, interpret, but also that we unconsciously enact the "fate" set by the past. (Origins in slavery and genocide create powerful historical and cultural patterns of inequality, and legacies of trauma, that white Americans repeat rather than face.)

3. Lear’s argument is that Freud is the heir of Sophocles, because both depict realities outside of or beyond consciousness, forces that exceed and disrupt and in many regards control us. Sophocles, like the author of Genesis or the author of Job, see powerful realities OUTSIDE the mind - which they try to apprehend and represent by ideas of divinity. Freud sees those authors and their representations as speaking to and reflecting powerful unconscious forces INSIDE the

mind. But Freud also sees those unconscious realities as a “phenotypic,” as a “collective unconscious” that bespeaks all of human history, which means this whole history is inside you. Lear endorses the view of Sophocles and Freud that we are not transparent to ourselves, that we mis-recognize ourselves (deceive ourselves) if we remain within the terms practical reason and imagine we are in charge of ourselves. Lear endorses the view that we ignore these realms or forces at our peril. For Lear, tragedy is the genre by which these forces are acknowledged.

4. east of eden, how is sexuality and labor organized, what forms/practices do human beings devise for production and reproduction? Gayle Rubin sees the marxist focus on production (and class conflict) as necessary but insufficient. It is necessary to explore the 'relations of production' by which a few exploit the labor of many to 'produce' the necessities of society and the surplus that elites appropriate. Marxism focuses on the alienation of people in labor they do not control, whose purposes they do not decide, and whose fruits they do not receive. Marxism focuses on 'the fetishism of commodities' by which the whole society is organized by buying and selling labor, land, time, bodily energy, information, everything turned into a commodity. But women are not only workers. Feminists see REproduction as organized by KINSHIP systems; kinship is the organization of reproduction by way of creating a ‘sex/gender system,’ just as production is organized by creating classes and a ‘mode of production.’ Both create two unequal classes, and the ‘labor’ of one is alienated to and controlled by the other. The radical project in both cases is to dismantle the class structure governing modes of (re)production, how we produce and how we do kinship. All human beings must raise their young, all young human animals need training and discipline to become adults, but style and character of these forms/practices/disciplines, and the style/character of the subjects created by these forms, can and do vary enormously, because they are CONVENTIONS NOT NATURE and conventions are open to remaking or revision.

5. Gender is the cultural meaning given to anatomical difference, e.g. vagina and penis. (and now, ostensible anatomical difference is no longer fixed as it were by nature.) So a patriarchal kinship system organizes the world into 'men' and 'women' -and demands 'compulsory heterosexuality'- whereas other systems of kinship are more flexible in what they call masculine and feminine, how they relate sexual relations to baby-making and child-raising, how they organize who ‘raises’ children as opposed to who is a biological parent, etc. ALL of this is culture and politics, not nature. So "gender" is not the name of literal sexual difference, but its culturally created meaning, imposed on people who are assigned/conscripted to become "properly masculine" or "properly feminine" -not just male and female- so that a structure of discipline, reward, and punishment create people with certain qualities. Under this regime, people internalize these codes, and enact judgments of what is masculine and feminine. In Freud's time the codes were very rigid and were punitively enforced, and same-sex desire was considered to make a boy or a girl into a monster rather than the normal or correct being they ought to be. Your moment, generationally and historically, after 40 years of feminism, is much more flexible and open, relatively, yes? Imagine that the patriarchal sex-gender kinship system, though, is still relatively intact in terms of sanctions and rewards to enforce properly masculine and properly feminine subjects, and it still violently punishes and controls female sexuality as well as those whose transgress its rules. Young human animals, growing up under this still-intact regime, will and do feel intense pressure and conflict to meet expectations and conform, pressure from parents and peers, and the expectations are internalized as judgments about who or how or what one should be. Those judgments are mostly unconscious, but we can become conscious of

them and struggle against them. This is where psychoanalysis and feminism (and queer theory) intersect. Only by going behind the father-son myth and the sex-gender system can we undo the patriarchal kinship structure that holds everyone captive to gender polarity, so that no one any longer has to be one thing or another, to 'be' x rather y, as if a one rather than a multiplicity.

6. Schorske's "the two digs" -on Freud's trajectory, and on Freud, the Bible, and Judaism.

A. The key thing, the most fundamental thing, is to begin with 'the mother' - and the relations with/feelings about mothers. What patriarchy does is identify culture with fathers -with the masculine as the holder of reason and autonomy - in contrast to the feminine/maternal as the holder of the emotional, the caring, the bodily, the dependent, the irrational. the patriarchal assumption is that nurture and autonomy are antithetical, that we must break bonds to achieve independence -the assumption identified with the properly masculine - as nurture means only dependence and regression. (ergo, the typical white american condemns 'the welfare state' and demeans those who are 'dependent on welfare.) There is no sense that autonomy is actually nurtured, that love enables autonomy. So the patriarchal regime says women are lacking what men have - the phallus as the signifier of power, status, autonomy - and in a patriarchal world men really do have power, autonomy, and status - but a patriarchal world is entirely haunted by the maternal, by the specter of the maternal, the threat of female power as emasculating men by seducing them back to childish dependence, impulse, regression. That primal mother is in fact not lacking anything; the maternal figure is incredibly powerful, exercising total power over life and death in our unconscious, but men make the compensatory move of saying WE have what SHE lacks, we are self-sufficient -we have the phallus women lack. In Freud's first dig, he recovers the primal mother behind the patriarchal narrative of fathers empowering sons to become fathers. She is the erased power, the feared power, the power haunting men in their dealings with every single actual woman. All that male strutting and demeaning of women, those declarations of independence and power, are necessary because men are never self-sufficient, always incomplete, and always lacking (-like all human beings in fact, which is why we need each other.) What Freud recovered is the possibility of going behind the splitting of properly masculine and properly feminine, call it androgyny, in which all the traits assigned to one or the other gender are actually human traits to affirm and develop in each person. To go behind the supremacy of father gods, or reason, or founders and leaders is to find another kind of relationality linked to maternal care, and capacities to care (and capacities for autonomy) in all of us. Abrahamite religion in all 3 branches literally displaced the power of female/maternal deities, or of pantheons that joined paternal/maternal and masculine/feminine -Freud went behind the splitting introduced by patriarchy to find a prior synthesizing. This bears on how we read the Bible. the god of the job poet is androgynous not paternal in his/her generativity. and there are glimmers everywhere in the text (beginning in the creation story) of goddesses and consorts that were being displaced. But the dominant weight establishes the patriarchal script - abstract god (abstracted reason and philosophy), fathers, law, ethical injunctions, instinctual renunciation. the ascetic ideal in its first iteration. Freud's 'first dig' according to Schorske, goes behind it. Likewise, Nietzsche went behind it when he endorsed a 'dionysian' view of life as libidinal energy, eros, flows, and becoming -Blake says excess and extravagance.

B. then why the second dig? why does freud end up aligning himself with Moses? He began by saying: if I cannot bend the higher powers, I will stir up the lower ones" - but he ends up on the

side of repression, endorsing the very splitting (and its costs) that he spent most of his life analyzing. I think, i would propose, that fascism was the key, that freaked him out. he saw fascism as regression to instincts, wishful thinking, fantasy. rather than an ethics that demands instinctual renunciation, especially of aggression, he saw people overthrowing moral norms and releasing aggression in the names of fantasies of male power and national/racial supremacy. So Freud wrote as if to shore up paternal authority, which seemed to him the only defense against regression and aggression, against a return to the golden calf. For him, fascism was golden calf worship, compared to worshiping an abstract god demanding ethical righteousness. fascism is regression from law and self-restraint to instinctual release and idol worship - associated by patriarchy with maternal power. For feminist theorists, though, fascism is the re-assertion of paternal power in a world that has seemed increasingly out of control, humiliating, emasculating, to reassert supremacy. Fascism is male father-rescue (Hitler, or Trump)against the fear of engulfment, invasion, emasculation. Fascism glorified entirely docile merely reproductive women, and heroic self-sacrificing men and their violence, the pure gendered split. fascism promises to re-secure gender roles, and hierarchies. fascism is not regression to the maternal, but the phobic intensification of patriarchal power that feels under attack by women and aliens and savages who don't accept the rules of property any more than the rules of gender. these are subtexts in Freud's second dig, I think, and we see this debate now in how people explain and respond to Trump and his base.

7. Freud’s reading of Judaism and the Bible - In M&M he argues that the Hebrews KILLED Moses, and therefore repeated the primal crime, whereby the sons rebelled against the primal father and his monopoly of women, but then established law to regulate themselves as a fraternity. That law requires the internalization, the super-ego, that creates an ‘ethical people,’ a people who value ethics above all - even when they reject theism, they do so in the name of ethics, including a commitment to both truth-telling and self-control. The hidden feature of this accomplishment is to elevate abstraction over the sensuality and materiality associated with the mother/women. He juxtaposes an abstract invisible god, beyond nature, in contrast to literal, tangible, material images, actual persons (kings, priests), and extravagant rituals. He juxtaposes a judaic legacy from Catholicism, which offers masses to ‘the masses.’ Catholicism, organized by the Madonna and child, appears as the opposite of Judaism, cast as a father-son religion. In contrast to Catholics, jews were unified in loving a god who punished them for their forbidden wishes, not allowed to sin by a forgiving unconditionally loving mother. But Jews had never grasped that the origin of their own religion lay in the murder of Moses, whose after-effect was this demanding religion of renunciation. They needed to see how their own aggression turned into this ethical engine, and thus to admit their aggression to gentiles, who accused them of killing Christ. If they could admit the sin-aggression that lay behind the law, they could join the rest of humanity rather than stand apart. On the other hand, anti-semitism equated Jews with sex and money -with egotism, material need, vulgarity, and excessive and transgressive desire- and Freud basically argued that ALL human beings are like this, not just jews. we are all ‘jews’ in this sense. But the second dig did this by endorsing instinctual renunciation, which actually intensifies forbidden wishes, generating ever deeper guilt, articulated as ever more intense demands for self-control and renunciation. If you accept the logic of Freud’s Moses book (of what Schorske calls the second dig) -if you pit law-as-ethics against instinct to demand renunciation, you are locked in a vicious trap. You must endorse paternal and punitive authority (and so endorse submission and guilt) to protect against instinct, aggression, and regression. The

alternative is to go behind the father to the mother, to find how nurture and autonomy are in fact connected, to see how standing up to paternal authority need not mean regression, but is actually an empowering step toward becoming one's own authority. My interpretations of Genesis, Exodus, and prophecy were meant to go against the grain of that logic, to emphasize instead how covenant, material needs, and freedom can be connected in empowering ways. Imagine a form of life, sustained by a covenant, that accepts the richness of unconscious life, the validity of libidinal pleasure, and the value of democratic relations among people equally entitled to regard and standing.

Modernity IV: Beyond Nihilism?

Readings

* Norman O. Brown, Love's Body (3-55,80-161,176-83,191-214,224-26,234-41,246-55,265-6)

Letter Fourteen: Norman O. Brown, Love's Body

1. Brown was one of the great 'heretical' or 'heterodox' interpreters of Freud, along with Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse. Like them, his first work (Life Against Death) emerged in the 1950s as an effort to explain how 'civilization and its discontents'-modern liberal society- could generate fascism. He is committed to the "Freudian" idea that we live by unconscious desires and projections of meaning, and, that these are fundamentally shaped by childhood, infant dependence, and the vicissitudes of bodily life, though also by our imagination, we might say by our own poetic representations (and narrations) of ourselves and the world we encounter.

2. Love's Body, published in 1966, is expressive of the counter-cultural 1960's, which would overturn a regime of "repression" on behalf of emancipating desire and imagination in ways that fostered new forms of self-expression and so of community. 'Love's body' echoes Jesus and Paul but also Marx in the insistence that human beings are one 'body,' one species, and echoes Nietzsche's claim that human beings emerge from the "dionysian womb" by dividing themselves through "apollonian" fictions that posit boundaries between groups and individual subjects -by fictions that posit distinct races, genders, nations, and that posit separate, autonomous selves. Brown thus calls his goal a "dionysian christianity" because he retains a 'christian' idea of universality and unity, but instead of the christian presumption of original sin, he endorses Nietzsche's presumption that reality is a "dionsyian' flux of creation and destruction, of becoming and transformation. Rather than represent an unchanging struggle between morality and instinct, Brown sees human culture as an unfolding relation between life's vital and excessive energies, and the contingent (unstable and transitory) forms and meanings human beings invent to shape those energies. Brown belongs in a 'vitalist' tradition (via Nietzsche) concerned to promote aliveness always in touch with the vital, amoral energy of 'life,' and so always aware of the artifice of the forms and meanings (the poesis) by which we shape it. Depicting a modern world organized as a 'death-in-life' because it anxiously and fearfully represses our aliveness, Brown endorses what he calls the resurrection of life from death. The reification of family, property, and the state by liberal modernity are here understood as cultural and political forms (institutions) that deaden life -that deaden life in the name of 'saving' or redeeming it. These are secured by a symbolic order that fixes morality, that divides owners and workers, women and men, black and white, that inscribes the grammar of a knowing and masterful 'subject' that is separate from the world and its objects, also separate from the verbs that denote its action. The resurrection of life thus entails a revolutionary project of overthrowing the central institutions of modernity and its enlightenment framework, to re-invent the human.

3. In terms of our course, Brown was a "Blakean" who believed we live in and through language, in and through symbols and metaphors, which are human inventions by the 'poetic genius' that is the 'god' in us. To "realize" this poetic genius -to become conscious of it, and thereby learn to 'play' with it- is to see both that we engage the world sensually and in embodied relations with

others, AND that our bodies and relations are always mediated symbolically. For Brown, following Blake and Nietzsche, the goal is to break down the subject-object split inherited from Descartes, and the spirit-flesh split inherited from Paul, as well as the symbolic-material split bequeathed by Marxism, so that human beings can become "conscious participants in creation" by their own (symbolic and symbolized) action. That means forging both material practices and symbolic forms on the assumption that the forms we invent -materializations of our poesis in language and social practices- are transitory, never finalizing reality or the truth about it. Rather than disclaim the role of myth-making in human life, Brown sees meaning-making everywhere, and rather than reify myths and practices in the name of truth and morality, he embraces "the melting of all that is solid, the profaning of all that is deemed holy," the better to reveal the holy vitality of life. For Brown, therefore, the greatest danger is "literalism" - by which we imagine that meaning is inherent in an object and a text -rather than projected and made by us as co-creators- and by which we insist that this meaning is single and fixed -rather than multiple and changing. For Brown, like Stanley Fish, the reader is an active participant in the creation of meaning, and therefore, like Blake, Brown sees us as active participants in creation itself through our poetic genius. To live in time, in the dionysian process of becoming, means accepting the inescapability of change but therefore also of loss, because no object, no love, no attachment, no symbolic invention, lasts forever. 'Religions' typically "institutionalize transcendence," as Harry Berger put it in "The Lie of the Land" essay, and the result is to "transcendentalize institutions," to naturalize or divinize them as fixed objects or reifications. For Brown (as for Berger, his colleague at Santa Cruz in those years) the goal is to recover our inventive and symbolic powers, and like the early Marx that means discovering how those powers are both collaborative and universal, key features of a "species-being."

4. Brown sees how masculinity and femininity are social constructions, and he posits an essential androgyny (and polymorphous perversity) in human beings, so he depicts the delusions of masculinity and patriarchy in their image of sovereign (rational, male) subject. He begins with the generativity of the mother, the womb of the dionysian as Nietzsche put it, to return this subject to the ground it disavows. His narrative is thus about men imprisoning themselves by disavowing that maternal/dionysian source, and about the possibility of resurrecting 'life' by returning to it, BUT he never writes about the experiences of mothers, or about the circumstances and challenges of daughters. His book is entirely about men and one could say for men, even though it has a 'feminist' theory of male subjectivity.

5. The deeper issue I hope we talk about in class is the 'romanticism' he inherits from Blake - its blindness and its dangers- and what it would mean to absorb the insights Nietzsche articulated in "the birth of tragedy." Brown accepts the insight of tragedy insofar as he sees human beings as living within elemental forces that exceed their rational comprehension, but his idea of love's body also seems to reject tragedy's insight about the <u>inescapability</u> of conflict and collision. In his political theology, like Blake's, we return to the garden, and in this regard, his theory is specifically anti-tragic and, anti-political. He offers a vision of enspirited flesh I would infuse into politics, but that is to go beyond and contradict his own sense of his redemptive mission.

White Supremacy as Political Theology and James Baldwin's Counter-Theology

Readings

* James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time
* James Baldwin, interview about John Brown and intro by Russel Banks
* George Shulman, "Political & Vernacular Theology"

Recommended :

* Baldwin selected essays

Discussion Questions for reading Baldwin, The Fire Next Time

1. Consider Baldwin the first great analyst of 'whiteness' as an ideology and a pathology -as a political theology. If whiteness is not skin color, not phenotypic, what is it? What does investment in "whiteness" signify for those who call themselves white? -investment in what assumptions about life and about identity? what kind of faith or theology is this? How does this investment, by those who call themselves white, shape how they live, what they value and desire, what they think, how they feel? - what does it do to them? Whereas whiteness is defined by positing blackness as deficiency, abjection, violence, and excess, and people marked black as a problem and danger to regulate or remedy, Baldwin "reverses the gaze." By what rhetorical art does he do this? Is he persuasive in speaking to whites about the world and selves they make? Why is ending white supremacy good for THEM, indeed essential if they are to be free and thriving?

2. what does he mean that whites 'intended for blacks to perish' ? What does he mean when he says their crime is not just the destruction they cause but their "innocence" about it? he does not say ignorance, and suggests a willful intentional aspect to what whites 'know' or admit or see. How is innocence their crime, and one he calls unforgivable? What is he saying in this way?

3. He theorizes the incredible power of the past to control everything we do. Whereas most white Americans associate freedom with ESCAPING the past, he thinks this is impossible -he rejects that core American idea, that we can leave the past behind. We only exercise and experience freedom to the extent that we FACE and ACCEPT the past, because it is only by admitting what it was that we gain the insight and energy to live differently, now. So think about his view of history on the one hand, and of freedom on the other hand.

4. How does JB depict the situation/dilemmas of those marked black? how does he advise black people to understand and negotiate -and change- a world ruled by white supremacy?

4. He uses the language of love - 'we shall with love force our younger brothers to see themselves as they are' - so we can "achieve our country" . What is this 'love" ??? Is it a form by acquiescence to white power, or a way to understand constructive confrontation? How is it an act of love to confront people so they see themselves as they are?

5. He keeps hoping that conscious whites will join with mobilized blacks to change the country, by finally facing and overcoming the color line. He does not reject “America,” but wants to make a truly new world, as if to fulfill the promise of "America." White supremacy, and its racial categories and inequality is ‘old world’ whereas a world no longer ruled by race would be a new one - and a world finally democratic. How does he imagine this change? How does he try to persuade whites to it? How does he persuade black people to engage with whites? What does he imagine will happen if whites refuse to accept the history and actuality of their ongoing interdependence with black people, refuse to accept their entanglement in a violent history?

6. Then read Baldwin’s interview about John Brown -given in 1974- after the murders of Malcolm X, Dr. King, Fred Hampton, Bobby Kennedy, and after Nixon was elected -twice- and the “southern strategy” was established to draw working class whites from the democratic party by promising that republicans would put protesting blacks and feminists in their place. Baldwin often says that black people must free whites to free themselves, but in this interview he says that only whites can free themselves, and that blacks cannot save them. What does this shift signify? In the interview does he remain attached to the idea of an American promise?

7. Think about Frederick Douglass’ great speech, and his claim that ‘argument’ cannot break through white disavowal, but only ‘scorching irony.” How does Baldwin manifest or enact this kind of irony? Think more broadly of the problem of trying to persuade people to let go of ideas and identities they are deeply and even fatally invested in. (An issue obvious during our moment now, but an issue at the forefront of every historical effort to seek ‘abolition democracy.’) Is persuasion possible? of whom? (e.g. some but not all whites? which?) under what conditions?

8. Baldwin's use of the word "we" keeps moving between we blacks, and we Americans including whites. What do you make of this fluidity? What do you make of his anguished, ambivalent, but still powerful attachment to the nation, insisting that we have lived in two nations but must make it one. How does he re-imagine the "promise" of "America" - what could "America" mean?

9. Think about the biblical tradition of prophecy - passing through the Black church - into the mind and heart and language of Baldwin. But he is not devout, he does not invoke god. Does he ‘secularize” prophecy? is prophecy a genre or idiom that is living still, rather than a dead artifact recovered from ancient texts. Does prophcy remain viable 60 years after Baldwin?

10. Recall your reading in Carl Schmitt about political theology - in which a community achieves sovereign existence by constituting “a frontier between friend and enemy,” and by “declaring an exception” - imagine that American liberalism, since the revolutionary war, has created a racial state of exception that violates every liberal norm to justify and allow slavery, to enslave, exploit, and kill black bodies. In Schmitt’s terms, white supremacy is the political theology of liberalism, at once establishing state/white sovereignty and declaring the racial state of exception (indigenous displacement, slavery and mass incarceration, Japanese internment, recent detention camps on the border, etc) that found or sustain the regime. Baldwin shows how this is so, but then the question is, how does he respond? Does he reverse the friend-enemy distinction and demand sovereignty for and by black people -a kind of revolutionary counter-nationalism? Does he fashion a different kind of counter-theology that refuses sovereignty as well as violence?

Letter Fifteen: on James Baldwin

I want to propose two contexts for reading Baldwin.

One is immediately political - our own political moment. Like Marx, Baldwin is one of the great critics of "liberal democracy" (a) because the ideal of formal equality actually presupposes (and leaves intact) massive social inequalities (by race, class, gender, -white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy are protected by liberal democracy; (b) because liberal democracy installs a possessive individualism that fetishizes both property and masculinized autonomy; and (c) because politics is reduced to voting and indirect/representative democracy, not embodied public action in concert with others.

Many of us are aware of the limits and failures of liberal democracy as designed by the founding fathers and defended in the Federalist Papers: (a) the anti-democratic features of that constitution has been exploited by the new right to cement explicit minority rule; (b) 40 years of right wing ideology (government is the problem not a solution) has destroyed the safety net, increased rather than decreased voter suppression, increased social inequality to gross levels, and allowed the egregious rule of wealth and influence in politics; and (c) the constitutional regime entails an ongoing state of exception for black, brown, and native people, who are not seen as having the right to have rights. But liberal democracy just had a near-death experience -and it was not clear last summer whether people (white and black) who felt the system is rigged would vote to save it. We are now living in the midst of a kind of civil war between whites, 70% of whom voted for Trump, and 30% of whom joined people of color to vote against him. My own view is that protecting liberal democracy, formal rights to speak, vote, assemble -to worship and love by right and choice, and so on -THIS framework does need to be protected, even though it is grossly inadequate, because it is the basis for further social change -people need to be able to create associations, speak out, vote, assemble in public, protest. If people can't assemble and protest, or vote, then we can't really initiate the kind of social changes that would make our society more equal in genuine, material, and tangible ways, or more able to address climate change. liberal democracy is our constitutional framework; it is anti-democratic in many ways, but it enables and entitles us to modify it in radical ways. If it is displaced by a more overtly authoritarian regime, which sees any protest as rioting, and voting by people of color as fraudulent, and makes both illegal or impossible, even the possibility of social change will be precluded. (This view is hotly contested; on the left I may be speaking a minority position, but when Bernie said people had to vote for Biden to protect democratic possibility- he made this argument. The counter-argument is that no formal or electoral politics can change the liberal regime, and that a parallel polis has to be built, locally, by social movements that turn aside from the state.) So the irony of the recent election was that people of color -for whom the system has never worked, and for whom the system was never intended to work, saved the republic from an authoritarian turn by still voting, and they did so because they knew we need the formalities of law and rights -to be taken seriously and not dismissed cynically- if we are to make the world more just and more free for all, to make a truly multi-racial democracy committed to social and not just formal or legal equality. But at the same time, we witness 70 million citizens who have no commitment even to formal equality or electoral democracy, living within a media bubble that massive covid death has not penetrated. To them, electoral democracy is a conspiracy of liberals, blacks and feminists to deprive them of their individual rights. Could any kind argument persuade them to think differently? Is there a role for rhetoric and persuasion - usually the core of a democratic political ideal? That question - about the possibility of persuasion, and of social

change -a question always related to whether whites can acknowledge racial domination in American history and contemporary society- is a bridge between our moment, and Baldwin.

Baldwin is perhaps one of the three greatest American theorists, or theorists of American culture and politics. At the core of his argument is the effort to explain the origin and meaning of the concept of "race" -of distinct 'white' and 'black' categories and differences- in relation to the construction of "two nations rather than one" -i.e. to explain how citizenship in this country since before its inception has been racialized, has been a form of standing or status, demarcating citizenship as "white." But pay close attention to how Baldwin theorizes what "white" or "whiteness" mean, because he sees whiteness as an ideology not as color or phenotype. European immigrants, at first positioned as "black" were nevertheless able to "become white." but what is that to become? What is this standing they aspire to, what is the norm called whiteness? And at the same time, how is it produced by denoting "blackness" and assigning certain people to that category? What is this "blackness" in what does it consist? In his anthropological and psychological diagnosis, "whiteness" is a form of life invested in property and domination -in the name of freedom! That diagnosis also requires analyzing how those who have been marked as black, and assigned to social death -to invisibility, non-recognition, and gratuitous violence- at the same time make a life and culture whose creativity and value he defends. Indeed, he sees that creativity and culture as redemptive. In a moment when the disparities of covid, the role of essential workers, and the murder of George Floyd created an opportunity for whites to see the racial structure of a society and their dependence on 'essential workers' who are predominantly people of color, it is invaluable to trace Baldwin's explanation of how whites have lived by disavowal, by willful blindness to and 'innocence' of realities -both inequality and essential work- hidden in plain sight. Will whites now revert to this default position? If so, what will they be protecting? What is the nature of what he calls their 'innocence'? And at the same time, what political choices does this situation pose to people marked as black? How have they and should they relate to this constitutional republic, founded on and sustaining a violent state of racial exception?

Not coincidentally, whites and blacks in the U.S. both practice forms of Christianity, and have used it to justify both domination and insurgency. So the second context for reading Baldwin are the ideas of "political theology" we have been exploring. Imagine Baldwin diagnosing whiteness AS a "theology," as an organizing and animating "faith" system and indeed as a ritualized (idolatrous) form of worship. What characterizes it? How shall it be criticized? At the same time, imagine Baldwin advancing a "counter-theology," by establishing a different relation to "blackness" -not as the name of 'sin' but as essential features of life itself. Remember, 'blackness' is not the same thing as actual black people, or as the category by which some people are marked and differentiated. What is the blackness those who call themselves white are so afraid of? How does that fear shape their lives? When they worship whiteness what are they worshiping or idealizing? What kind of idol is this? What is an alternative faith or orientation? We see here the question of authority being taken up again - what idea/institution do you orient by? what do you value? Likewise, Baldwin pursues the question of identification - asking who we identify with and on what basis? He rejects "race" as the basis of identification -he insists that race is fundamentally a fiction, though it has been materialized- but he also argues that people live by fictions that comprise 'churches, mosques, nations, armies' - any community is both imagined and invented- so notice how he conceives the solidarity of black/brown people.

And as in every text we have read so far, the third key issue is redemption - what do people seek to be 'saved' from? redemption (as deliverance) FROM what? But also, how do people try to 'redeem' -make meaningful or valuable- the suffering in their history and lives? these are foremost questions in all political theologies, and all make judge whether our pursuit of redemption is self-defeating, destructive to others, futile or impossible, or, necessary and possible. Think of Moses and prophets, of jesus and Nietzsche - all are engaged in these questions of authority, identification, and redemption. So Baldwin is asking what would produce redemption for this country? (redemption from what, redemption of what?) What could redeem -make somehow meaningful or valuable- the history of loss, injury, pain of black people? Could white redeem themselves? how? His defense of John Brown is an argument about how whites need to see their situation and take responsibility for their own redemption. In turn, deep inside our texts has always been the question of FREEDOM - ever since Eve was curious about the apple and gained knowledge, ever since Adam and Eve had to build lives on their own terms east of Eden- i.e. freely, though always under the pressure of suffering and mortality. Baldwin is the greatest theorist of freedom in this country. In what does freedom consist? In what ways do whites abdicate freedom precisely in their forms of belonging and their idol of whiteness? In what ways do black people model the meaning of freedom, even in conditions of captivity?

1. "Race" is invented to justify slavery. Black and white become operational code to distinguish the normative (thus superior) from the deviant, savage, inferior. In a "democracy" that declares that all men are created equal, it is imperative to explain/justify enslavement - and it is done by inventing blackness and whiteness. (Whiteness is invented by positing blackness.) On the one hand, whiteness is the name of the normative or ideal; on the other hand, blackness "explains" why these people are enslaved, or unequal, or not fully human, or in ghettos. White supremacy works not only as a systematic differentiation of some people (those who have or gain the status of "white") from others marked as non-white or black. Institutions entail differentiation in terms of resources, life chances, conditions, access, power, status, but the dominant narrative explains inequality by depicting black pathology. So even with formal equality, social inequality is systemically produced, but never acknowledged, because narratives (say melodramas) of black pathology and deficiency "explain" ghettos - not segregation, labor markets, public policy e.g. to specifically exclude black labor from new deal welfare state programs, post war mortgage programs, GI bill, etc. So, the very idea of "race" as naming certain attributes is one way racism works. That idea of race has changed in some ways, it is now seen as more cultural than literally biological, but the fundamental meaning remains -distinctly differentiated people, as if race (groups distinguished by "race") are PRIOR to politics, not produced in and by politics imposing fictions and categories. In fact, historically, the colonists produced "democracy" and "race" at once, as race justified slavery and exclusion from citizenship, and both democracy and race are political creations -i.e. intentional, collective, institutional.) Race is a political category and institution entwined with the creation and practice of "democracy" as we have inherited it.

2. I would emphasize the degree to which Baldwin interprets whiteness as a form "innocence," i.e. a willful refusal to see or know, as if refusing to grow up, not merely ignorance -what we choose not to know but could know if only we looked- but willful blindness, a "not wanting to know" -to see - what is in plain sight - and a not wanting to "see" all the ways that how enfranchisement is racialized, for some at the expense of others. And it is a willful refusal of (not ignorance of) responsibility for what the nation does. So when you think about the garden of

eden - of their ‘innocence’ - Baldwin is playing on that, too. it is the innocence that is culpable because it is willful. So for Baldwin the two sides of American history are: domination and disavowal - ongoing domination (pervasive inequality and gratuitous violence) by racialization - and - disavowal of that fact. Ongoing exclusion and disavowal of that fact. George says that for Baldwin whiteness is in some senses an identity premised on disavowal -of death (i.e. transience of life and flesh, vulnerability, our inescapable interdependence) but also of actual dependence historically (on slave labor, on essential workers, etc) and of responsibility. disavowal of key aspects of "life," key aspects of human sociality, and of specific connection to black people in this country. Those disavowals are entailed by an identity that seeks safety, exemption, sovereignty against all that 'black' or blackness represents. To come to terms with HISTORY is to face both the ongoing domination and the ongoing disavowal. But how is this harmful not only to blacks, but to whites? (If whites could grasp that THEY are damaged by whiteness, would that change their relation to the category, would/could people begin to separate themselves from that identity?) When i think of whiteness, i also think of the false comfort provided by Job's "friends" - who offer false solace bcause they cannot bear to see the darkness of life. i think of Nietzsche's "slave" - who defines identity negatively by saying what they are not, and who express rancor at life in their every breath and act. I think both of explicit fascists and of 'good germans.' But remember, Baldwin does not essentialize whiteness or whites. it is historical, cultural, specific. there are white liberals, there are fascists, there are real abolitonists like John Brown. (And we can see how hispanic men are now quite attracted to a kind of whiteness that promises respectability, proper masculinity, autonomy, prosperity, just as earlier european immigrants "became white," as they abandoned specific origins in regions or nations, and sought to be included here as whites entitled to citizenship. Don't fix or reify white people as if a homogenous entity, see the politics -e.g. 30% now support multi-racial democracy and a third reconstruction.)

3. “White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this- which will not be tomorrow and might very well be never- the Negro problem will no longer be needed.” So “blackness” or “the negro” or “n-----”is the <u>invention</u> by which whites act out their self-hatred, anxiety, self-division, as they split off what they call blackness and project on others. The “Negro problem” is in fact the invention of those who call themselves “white,” a category and chimera that reflects and reproduces their “problem,” the pathology he analyzes in terms of their inability to ‘accept and love themselves.’ He reverses the gaze: rather than whites looking at their ‘black’ other as a problem, he diagnoses their imprisonment in ideology, in fiction, in self-denial. At one level that denial is ontological - what aspects of LIFE do these people seek exemption from, or find only in their other, not in themselves? At a second level, disavowal or willful blindness includes the denial of history, of the reality of white supremacy as an ONGOING historical phenomena - whereby slavery becomes an event put in the past, rather than a structure whose effects are ongoing. At a third level, there is disavowal of actual black people as inseparably part of and crucial to “American” life - as if “America” really is “white” when in fact it has never been.

4. Those who call themselves white are divided, some minority has always been ‘abolitionist’ -and that minority is bigger than ever before in our history- supporting steps to make people genuinely more equal in their resources (not just access.) But a majority remain invested in their “racial” distinction. They do not see themselves necessarily defending inequality as such, but in defending individual rights they assume that any inequalities follow from each individual’s talent

and effort, or lack thereof. They do not see systemic or structural or state-enforced differentiation. Many of these whites are working class; they are not rich or powerful, nor are they in positions of literal domination over people of color; they are more likely to live in highly segregated or rural areas, and remain fearful of the "cities" ('urban wilderness') they associate both with black people -and with the educated elites who they see as supporting undeserving black people rather than deserving whites. They see elites, aligned with blacks (and feminists) stealing 'our country;' they resent a state that they think gives welfare to blacks, when no one should get it, or only the deserving. This has been the dominant understanding since Nixon in 1968. At the same time many affluent whites live in exclusive gated communities and suburbs, closer to cities, define themselves as taxpayers, as individuals whose income is TAKEN by the state, and they want to reduce what they spend on the state, and thus on others. They do not see a powerful value in public goods, they are privatized and disavow how much they themselves depend on public goods (or essential workers.) They believe they have succeeded entirely on their own individual merit, which is a gross distortion of history that allowed some but not others to accumulate wealth, and of the public policy that underwrote mortgages, highways, suburban development, higher ed. Among whites are also the evangelicals (who voted for Trump transactionally, because he would end abortion, but they are also invested in heteronormativity and traditional marriage.) So "whiteness" is not a simple or even homogenous thing, it is more like an assemblage or package of commitments and norms and there are different component constituencies. In this regard, European immigrants struggled and protested in an effort to BECOME white (and they were allowed finally to gain that status.) Latinix people are now going through these debates about how they identify, with whom, on what basis. Accordingly, "whiteness" is a constant, but not static or unchanged; there are mutations in what it means and who counts. Likewise, white supremacy is a constant but also mutating, through the institutions that change. For Jim Crow legalized apartheid, and openly endorsed racial aversion, whereas after the civil rights movement, overt racism became more unacceptable, so that differentiation had to be produced and justified differently - e.g. by culture not biology, through the apparently impersonal operation of labor markets and schools, or practices defining criminal conduct and punishment.

5. But the civil rights movement did initiate significant reforms, which in turn enabled the emergence of a much larger black middle class and far greater participation of black people in politics and culture - though these reforms also allowed the emergence of intensified inequality within the black community, and also the emergence of mass/hyper incarceration as a new form of jim crow segregation.) Baldwin in the mid-1970s saw the first reconstruction as having failed - whites backed out - and saw the civil rights era as a second reconstruction that whites also abandoned and turned against. in each moment, black activism forced concessions by elites and the white majority, but not a real commitment to equality carried through by remaking all the institutions of civil society -health, housing, employment, schools, policing. So Baldwin felt there had not been "progress" in that deep sense. The election of Obama would NOT have changed his view, unless it signified that "renewal in the depths" by endorsing a reconstruction that really committed to overcoming structural inequality.

5. Notice, he shows the damage that racism causes to black people, but he does not focus on damage. He has reversed the gaze - we are always cast by whites as a pathology, that is their way of avoiding responsibility for putting us in ghettos and prisons - but he wants to focus on the pathology of whites. he does not idealize black people, but he does want to emphasize the extraordinary qualities of black life that are typically not seen. So how does he understand the culture created by enslaved people (and then formerly enslaved but still oppressed/excluded people) marked as "black" (that is, not as people from specific places or tribes, but as belonging to a specific 'race' with certain attributes)? the culture they create is not natural to or expressive of a fixed "race", but historical and specific, created under conditions HERE, in which certain people have been racialized. What do those folks MAKE of those circumstances? what orientations and dispositions and values do they develop to face, confront, survive, refuse, and flourish in the face of ongoing racism? What CHOICES do they repeatedly negotiate in how they understand and face oppression? how does he use the Nation of Islam both to tell a truth about white supremacy, and, to argue with black readers about better and worse ways to respond to it? What are his criteria for criticizing the NOI?

6. Baldwin himself enacts and embodies a complex picture of one who is marked as black. Partly, he refuses the discourse: “I am not your negro.” I refuse to be defined by you, your categories, your projections - though I must constantly contend with your definitions and projections, constantly deal with “the negro” as this powerful image/discourse/fiction that exists as a reality. Partly, he takes up the marking (I’m black and I’m proud.) Partly, he reverses the gaze and focuses on white pathology. Partly he says, we have to confront you if we are to be free. We cannot be free unless you are free. But partly he also says, we have forged our own lives in the segregated spaces you imposed on us with the (disavowed) intention that we perish. Audre Lorde said, we were not meant to survive. So therefore, he affirms black vitality and creativity -thriving- in such conditions. The central debate during the whole history of black life in the U.S. is over the question of whether it makes sense to engage whites and the white state. Black elites, with considerable popular support have repeatedly organized, acted, protested, to gain recognition and true equality - to achieve political emancipation (formal rights, especially the vote) and then/thereby to seek something beyond it -to engage the white world in pursuit of a second (and now third) reconstruction. But there have always been incredibly important and powerful and popular voices who doubt this strategy can be successful and who turn away from black elites and a state-centric politics oriented around building a coalition with liberal whites. There are not just voices on one “side” or the other “side” (e.g. in 1890 Booker T. Washington says orient amongst ourselves, while Douglass and then Du Bois say seek citizenship) but these voices are also internal to every great thinker -at moments Douglass and Du Bois also counsel turning away, turning inward, toward self-help amongst ourselves, as Malcolm X argued. The Black Panthers might be said to have made both moves. But the point is that Baldwin is thinking through what it means to be positioned as black in this history and nation-state. What is notable about Baldwin in 1962 is that he says -against Elijah and Malcolm- that we blacks are Americans, we cannot divorce ourselves from this place, or these people, who are our ‘younger brothers.’ We have to make one nation, not two. We have to refuse their disavowal of our presence, and, we will not ever integrate on their terms -we will not ‘integrate into a burning house’- but rather, we are bringing new standards to the regime, a new reconstruction. In 1972, however, white disavowal seems immovable, and on that basis, he says let us thrive amongst

ourselves, and develop our own standards or values for ourselves, while whites remain imprisoned in their “chimeras” of “money, power, and safety.”

7. There is a general theory of freedom here, I think. We are mortal, sentient, limited creatures, also incredibly creative. We are characterized by powerful internal drives, and external pressures. We are always creative, always agents, always free in that sense -but our agency our capacity to act (Arendt) is also always conditioned, not absolute. We are subject to determination by social forces and history, but we CAN break a pattern -that miracle, as Arendt also argued, is ALWAYS happening, if we look for it. For Baldwin, our capacity to change, to become more self-determined depends on accepting THAT and HOW we are shaped, determined, conditioned. Because THEN we can see it, and we muster the energy to change the patterns that had been unconscious or automatic or habitual. So he says to both blacks and whites, we must ACCEPT ourselves as we are, ACCEPT our history as a fact, not to acquiesce or surrender, but to thereby begin the process of change. So for Baldwin freedom is inherently paradoxical -it is not bondage OR freedom, but actually we are always conditioned, we grow up through are shaped by and inherit various kinds of ‘bonds,’ but these are the condition upon which we act. Even literal bondage gives me the materials and resources on which and by which they creatively work. What can we make of this history, he asks his white and black readers. Rather than depict autonomy as freedom FROM others, and history, which takes a human being entirely out of the context that makes them human, he says what do we make OF our history and WITH others. “Love” is linked to freedom because love is an act of commitment, not obligation as such but commitment, an expression of desire, and a relation of active struggle at once with ourselves and with others. His view is that we have to struggle with our particular “inheritance” (ethnic, national, familial) but we thereby achieve our birthright (the capacity to talk more broadly about the human.) To struggle with the particularities of our own life circumstances is the only basis on which to strive toward universality. There is no universality by abstracting from one’s/our embodied history. But he worries that whites will “abdicate” this struggle; they will not see how their own freedom depends on and is enhanced by black struggle for their freedom. He does not see a zero-sum.

8. Imagine Baldwin’s FNT offering a ‘counter-theology’ to white supremacy in both style and content. what dispositions, comportment, orientation, affect, and action would present a real alternative to a society/culture invested in whiteness (as whiteness is invested in self-possession, mastery, sovereignty, property, safety, etc)? How is "LOVE" part of this counter-theology? what does he mean by love? how is it related to the darkness and tragedy he insists is part of life? when you think about love, recall Moses and Jesus, but also recall Norman O. Brown ---recall how Brown is writing to complicate or ironize the fiction of "the subject" as the separate,, self-sufficient, autonomous ego -aligned with whiteness and masculinity- whereas he puts us back into bodies -sentient, mortal, needy, yearning, needy, dependent, willful- and he puts us into time (historicity and change.) To live symbolically is inescapable, but all symbols are transient. To live by fictions of identity is necessary for humans to take form at all, but we must also see the ways that our fictions are undone by 'life.' to see we live by what Brown and Baldwin call "masks" (race and gender are masks, organizing fictions, identity-forms) -that we cannot live without and cannot live within, Baldwin says. But Brown and Baldwin make judgments that some fictions are wholly destructive because they are composed as dichotomies, black-white, male-female, civilized-savage, saved-unsaved, etc. When we REIFY “nations,

tribes, steeples, mosques, races," Baldwin says, THEN we trap ourselves. But could we live otherwise? What would a counter-theology propose, and do?

For Baldwin, essentially, a counter-theology begins (like the Hebrew Bible did) with embodiment (a) we live in mortal bodies; Adam means dirt; Job says he is comforted that he is dust; and so also (b) in history (outside Eden), and (c)by (productive and reproductive) labor and so by social interdependence. But (d) we also live in (not only use but live in) language, so that human life and human materiality is inseparable from the symbolic, all the way down. Baldwin's theology proposes shared responsibility (Hebrews called it joint liability) for these features of human life. As Arendt argues in "Collective Responsibility," we live within historical communities, and if we opt out of one to enter another, we must assume responsibility for its history as a condition of membership. In these ways, from Moses to Baldwin we see the political idea of collective responsibility for each other, and for the world we make and inhabit. What he calls 'innocence' is the disavowal of these realities, a claim of exemption whose 'price' is both domination of others and sterility. To acknowledge "from whence you came" is the premise of any attempt at expanding the scope of our freedom to act otherwise. It is the premise of one's own individuality, as the heart needs both the systolic and diastolic. Acknowledgment of one's 'inheritance' -a particular history or positionality- is thus the condition of claiming "one's birthright," which is access to one's humanity: rather than transcend particularity to achieve an imagined universality, he proposes finding universality and achieving human being in and through deep engagement with the particular, historical, embodied experience. That engagement is not idealized or sanitized, but critical and ambivalent. Accordingly, his counter-theology does not so much seek freedom from history as through it, within, by -and against- it. (This is the point Coates makes so beautifully in his testimony endorsing the idea of reparations: "the question is not whether we'll be tied to the somethings of our past" that we feel proud of, 'but whether we are courageous enough to be tied to the whole of them." But this very engagement with the "whole" of history, Baldwin argues, includes the idea of the miraculous: "the impossible" repeatedly happens because human beings recurrently enact what (history or realism) deem impossible. the proof is black history itself -we were not meant to survive. His sense of the 'weight' or gravity of history does not entail despair about our agency but rather is the ground of that creativity. What Baldwin calls 'love' is this spirit of 'struggle' -evoking Jacob with the angel he calls it a 'wrestling.'

Baldwin's counter-theology is thus "tragic" in several senses. (a) humans make a life and sustain "light" in relation to "the darkness from which they come and to which they return;" (b) he attributes to human beings an abiding possibility of self-deception and destructiveness; (c)he sees collision of competing perspectives, powers, interests. He does not try to escape these features of life, but rather, he writes to inhabit them, to help us inhabit them. he 'holds' the problem rather than disappear it. At the same time, therefore, he concludes FNT by insisting that the responsibility for our fate is in OUR hands, and he means that both personally and collectively - here is the existential dimension that we have seen run through the bible, though often displaced by the didactic and moralistic. at each moment the bible dramatizes incredibly consequential choices, fate-ful decisions that could have been otherwise, and this emphasis on 'decision' is central to Buber's account of what prophets demand from their audiences, and central to Schmitt's sense that the essence of politics is just this act of commitment and faith. that is not to deny all the background conditions, but to foreground the existential drama. IN these ways

Baldwin does not leave the bible behind so much as translate its central political questions - about authority, identification, and redemption- its central theoretical and political inventions -the critique of idolatry, the ideas of covenant and joint liability- and its deepest narrative structures.

Political Theology, Civil Religion, and 'America'

Readings

* John Wintrhop, "Sermon"
* Sacvan Bercovitch, "preface"
* Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address"
* Barack Obama, speeches
* Shulman, "civil religion and prophecy"
* Kim TallBear, "Caretaking Relations & American Dreaming"

Recommended:

* Sacvan Bercovitch, new 'preface' to American Jeremiad (x)

Letter Sixteen: Civil Religion and Prophecy in the Trump moment

drawing on course readings by Winthrop, Lincoln, Robert Bellah, Sacvan Bercovitch, speeches by Obama.

Introduction

It is both disturbing and instructive to recall how recently scholars of civil religion and prophecy, myself included, were debating Barack Obama's campaign and presidency. That debate was initiated by his founding repudiation of Jeremiah Wright, paired with his claim to represent a "Joshua" moment in civil rights era history; that debate focused on accounts of "prophecy," in relation to his invocation of the mythos of an exceptional civic nationalism, and to his political pragmatism as the elected leader of a racist and imperial nation. Since then, however, Donald Trump based his campaign and presidency on repudiating Obama's legacy, including his invocations of the progressive universalism in the liberal nationalism that has legitimated both American empire and social reform. But also, a powerful "resistance" is now debating how to narrate -to explain and make meaningful- both the event of Donald Trump and the meaning (the legacy and future) of that universalism, as part of organizing and legitimating opposition. In the context of the Trump event, therefore, this essay revisits and as it were updates debates about prophecy and civil religion in American politics.

Foundational debates about "civil religion"

One stream of scholarship about American politics has involved the idea of "civil religion," and so debate about cultural consensus and liberal nationalism. The backdrop was Louis Hartz's 1955 The Liberal Tradition in America, which depicted the absolute hegemony of a Lockean liberalism invested in formal rights, property ownership, individualism, and a narrowly procedural constitutionalism. This ideology and regime, Hartz argued, could not grasp structural inequality, make sense of social revolution, or constructively engage decolonization across the globe. For Hartz, McCarthy's paranoid anti-communism was the symptom of this "monomaniacal" liberalism because it imagined even European social democracy as a despotic threat to "liberty." In contrast, in 1967 Robert Bellah wrote a seminar essay that invoked Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America to depict a Judaeo-Christian "civil religion" as the consensual, but critical and political supplement to an acquisitive liberalism that cannot otherwise articulate collective purpose or "substantive vision."

For the Durkheimean Bellah, "religion" gives the social cohesion and moral purpose without which a merely self-interested and fragmenting liberalism could never have survived. He

called religion "civil" because, following Tocqueville, he saw it as the basis of, and yet set apart from, explicitly political and republican institutions that it at once justified and limited. A "civil religion" comprised of moral norms and civic obligations, he argued, was crucial to chasten the idea of limitless freedom derived from myths of the frontier and endless economic growth. More than a hundred years after Tocqueville, however, Bellah called civil religion a "broken shell" because it had consistently been used to justify imperial expansion, racial domination, and an acquisitive, "materialistic" culture. Still, his subsequent jeremiad, The Broken Covenant (1975) insisted that civil religion remained a resource by which to justify dissenting social movements, domestic reform in the name of equality, and criticism of both nationalism and imperialism.

At moments of crisis, he argued, political leaders like Lincoln used its biblical language to call a special nation to face both its sins and its higher redemptive purpose; invoking William Lloyd Garrison and Eugene Debs, he argued to 60's activists that critics of racism or empire must speak in widely resonant (biblical) terms, or incur cultural marginality and political impotence. In the American case, indeed, rhetorically effective dissent must take the "prophetic" form of calling people to (re)turn to their own professed first principles and highest aspirations. Critics who do not invoke "any genuinely American pattern of values," the "better instincts of American patriotism" or "the deeper moral instincts of Americans" will fail, thereby allowing a corporate, imperial regime to "undermine essential American values and constitutional order." For Bellah, then, the risk in democratic politics is not faith, what John Rawls called "comprehensive doctrine," but giving up (or ceding to the right) the civil religion that could give dissent a culturally legible, legitimating ground. Paradoxically, then, an effective democratic (or in European terms social democratic) politics must not cede idioms of religion and nationality to the right.

In turn, the "liberal-communitarian" debates were initiated by his own Habits of the Heart (1985) and climaxed with Michael Sandel's Democracy's Discontent (1998), which challenged the "liberal" vision of an "unencumbered" self, as it were fully formed, rational, and self-interested, entering into social contracts for limited ends. Theories premised on such "liberal individualism," he argued, exemplified in dominant constitutional jurisprudence as well as the political theory of John Rawls, depicts a sociological impossibility, and invests "self-making" liberal subjects in disavowal of their own cultural, social, and material conditions of possibility. The acknowledgments voiced by civil religion are essential to "remind," as Tocqueville put it, possessive individuals (and "factions" deploying the Madisonian machinery of government) of the collective -at once sociological and ethical- premises on which democracy depends.

A powerful critique of these arguments was fashioned by Sacvan Bercovitch. Rejecting the premise that "liberal" and "communitarian" positions were contradictory, he instead depicted how communitarian concerns were in fact internal to a liberal nationalism that showed a remarkable capacity to absorb and disarm dissent. In his view, that is, civil religion authorized, not limited, both liberal individualism and nationalist religiosity. His specific claim was that American civil religion included "the ritual form" of a "jeremiad" -a narrative of decline and crisis, seeking renewal and redemption- has worked to "contain" voices and movements of dissent in nationalist and liberal terms. Whereas Bellah feared marginality if critics do not use civil religion as a democratic resource, Bercovitch depicted incorporation: a "prophetic civic identity" binds critics to the hegemonic form of liberal nationalism. Whereas Bellah wrote a jeremiad to argue that civil religion could be used to contest the abstract formalism of liberal principles, the exclusions they have justified, and the "arrogance" of an imperial nationalism, for Bercovtich this very genre of criticism works only as a "rite of assent." Jeremiadic rhetoric

makes “the very exposure of social flaws” into a “ritual of socialization,” because dissent is taken as essentially “American,” to re-affirm the redemption of an exceptional American possibility. The “dream that inspires [critics] to defy the false Americanism of their time,” he thus argued, is what compels them “to speak their defiance as keepers of the dream.”

As the jeremiadic form always authorizes criticism by invoking sacred origins and first principles of a chosen people, so criticism in the United States repeatedly confirms the hegemony both of liberal principles and of a specifically national frame for politics. To refuse either, he claimed, is to sacrifice legitimacy. Distinguishing Eugene Debs from Emma Goldman, and Martin Luther King from Malcolm X, Bercovitch identified the hegemonic gravity defining how critics “must” speak to be legitimate. Contingent yet intractable, this must signals strategic and internal pressures that drive critics to redeem the society they criticize. Accordingly, he argued, American politics unfolds not in conflict over “moral and social alternatives” to liberal nationalism, but through competing calls for “cultural revitalization” of its authentic but jeopardized values. “Civil religion” thus promises that an imperilled people can be redeemed by making good on, not contesting, its founding ideals, which sustains the founding dream of a special nation capable of endless progress.

Grasping how politics in the United States “contains” actors and alternatives because credibility depends on investing “America” with sacred and redemptive meaning, Bercovitch depicted a “poly-ethnic, multi-racial, openly materialistic, self-consciously individualistic people knit together in the bonds of myth,” a “modern nation living in a dream,” a “collective fantasy” that collapses the secular and the sacred. In contrast, he proposed recognizing the United States “for what it is, not a beacon to mankind as Winthrop proclaimed...not even a covenanted people robbed by un-American predators of their sacred trust,” but “one more profane nation in the wilderness of the world.” What would it mean, he asked, if “America” were severed from “the United States?” The question jolts to a degree that signals the hegemonic grip, unsaid and invisible, that he names, and contests.

Arguments about the relation of religion to both liberalism and nationalism have been restaged repeatedly since the new right organized a defensive nationalism that mobilized evangelicals, anti-state animus, and militarization while demonizing 60s dissent and its concern with racial injustice, imperialism, and corporate power. The post-60s academic and cultural left could be said to have reiterated Bercovitch by refusing both liberal language and a national(ist) frame for imagining and conducting politics, while Richard Rorty’s Achieving America, in 1998, could be said to have reiterated Bellah by lamenting left marginality and defending a “progressive” nationalism in the spirit of Whitman, Lincoln, and Dewey. These debates were sustained during the years of Clinton’s presidency, which sought legitimacy and electoral success by accepting the terms set by the “Reagan Revolution;” then again in response to 9/11; and more recently at key moments in Obama’s political trajectory. But Obama’s political career made visible a second stream of scholarly argument, which contrasts rather than fuses “prophetic” language and “biblical” civil religion.

Defining “Prophecy”

Whereas Bellah and Bercovitch aligned prophecy and civil religion, a variety of scholars have depicted a more agonal relation through accounts of abolitionism, the historic idiom of the Black church, and a radical reading of Martin Luther King. The implication of their arguments is that Bercovitch in fact imposed the very homogeneity he claimed to oppose: because he ignored racial domination and division, he also occluded the radical impact of the ways that critics of white supremacy inflected “prophetic” speech. Indeed, as Black and white critics and activists

used the genre of prophecy to contest white supremacy, I myself have argued, they developed a critical view of the liberal axioms, jeremiadic rhetoric, and national frame that have indeed dominated American politics as a "civil religion." Whereas Bercovitch split an incorporated inside from a radical and "un-American" outside, critics of white supremacy -like Frederick Douglass and Henry Thoreau, the radicalized Martin Luther King and James Baldwin- used prophetic idioms to advance an agonistic politics. As they tried to redeem a democratic promise from betrayal and failure, they articulated a conflicted and critical relationship to both liberalism and nationalism.

Indeed, because they were working not within a democratic framework, but confronting the racial state of exception that at once founds and violates it, these critics also lived a vexed relationship to the democratic ideals they valued. They had to stand in tension with individual rights and not only property rights, with majority rule and the rule of law, with conventional forms of pluralism, customary practices of localism, and ideologies of individual and ethnic mobility, all of which protected slavery, then legal apartheid, and now, ongoing forms of institutionalized racism. We hear this obviously non-liberal form of prophecy when Martin Luther King turns from the problem of jim crow to capitalism and poverty, militarism and imperialism. We hear him move against and beyond civic nationalism or even civil religion as he denies providential status to the United States and instead identifies it as the greatest purveyor of violence in the world. As Bercovitch argued, these arguments marginalized the living King and divided the civil rights movement, but the murdered King was re-enfolded within American exceptionalism, as if he stood only for liberal principles and wholly within the national frame. In our racial history, an agonistic prophecy emerges as distinct from civil religion but also as legible because of it.

To say "prophecy," therefore, is to designate not so much the literal words of "The Book of Revelation" as a biblical genre, involving characteristic tropes and figures of speech, that is taken up and transformed, from the English Revolution to the abolitionist and black church tradition in America. What is sanitized in a now- canonized King is the radical and political character of the re-workings of this genre by critics of white supremacy. Such reworking may intersect with the jeremiadic narrative of civil religion, and its idioms are readily recognizable even by Americans who are secular, but it entails a profoundly agonist rather than consensual politics. It may intersect with the language of liberal rights as it objects to disenfranchisement, exclusion, and violence in the name of egalitarian respect for the dignity of every human being, and it may register the reality of national identification as it criticizes the already-enfranchised and insists they recognize the membership of people they have disavowed or cast out. But, this prophecy is not oriented toward mere inclusion on given (liberal nationalist) terms, but rather toward fundamental reconstitution of a regime built on domination and idolatry.

Like the biblical prophets, critics in the American prophetic tradition remember what people forget: the haunting consequences of conduct in the past, practices of domination now, and those Toni Morrison calls "the disremembered and unaccounted for." These critics thus perform central aspects of the "office" of prophecy as depicted in the Bible. First, they speak as messengers, to announce unspeakable truths and unescapable realities, which people disavow, but which they must acknowledge if they are to flourish. When Amos announces a just god, when Nietzsche announces the death of God, when Frederick Douglass depicts how the freedom of some depends on the slavery of others, when Baldwin names "the price of the ticket," or when Morrison depicts the disavowed past ruling the present, they avowedly draw on prophecy as a genre to make imperative claims about truths we deny at great cost. Second, prophecy is the

office of witnesses, who make present what has been made absent and who say what they see and stand against it. They bear witness against domination, and on behalf of those who are not counted as real by the enfranchised, but they also bear witness to what our professed principles really mean or entail. Third, prophecy is the office of watchmen who would forestall danger by warning of it, and by showing it can be averted if we amend our ways. As we hear when Baldwin warns of "the fire next time," watchmen do not decree a fate, but insist on our capacity to act otherwise, though sometimes they must announce that it is too late to avoid the relentlessly unfolding consequences of past conduct. Their office is not to predict as such, but as Martin Buber argues, to call people to a fundamental and fateful "decision" about constitutive practices and first principles. Thus, if the danger they warn of comes to pass, it means they have failed. Lastly, therefore, the prophet's office is to compose songs of lamentation, for they must witness the pathos of our freedom and they must try to redeem the past for the present by endowing our suffering -and self-destruction- with meaning.

In each regard, prophecy is a political "office" because those called to it must address a worldly community about its circumstances and history, its professed principles and prevailing practices, its choices and their fate-ful consequences. Prophecy is also political in the sense that a speech-act conjures into being, to reconstitute, the collective subject prophets ostensibly address. "Prophecy" thus refers not only to an office whose inhabitants make certain kinds of claims about collective life, but to characteristic speech-acts and registers of voice: the imperative voice that announces truths we deny at great cost, that declares the costs of (in)action, and that stipulates the terms of redemption; the claim of judgment that insists a practice must be overcome, not tolerated or limited; the demand for action that declares "the fierce urgency of the now," as King put it, insisting on "decision" rather than deferral of responsibility.

Obviously, therefore, prophetic speech acts seem -and can be- dangerous to a democratic politics organized by the pluralist axiom that all viewpoints are valid. Because critics of white supremacy work not within a democratic frame, however, but address the exclusions and silences that constituted it, this tension is unavoidable. Indeed, in a liberal society especially, critics of domination turn repeatedly to the genre of prophecy because they need to voice problems and concerns that are occluded by liberal idioms of individual rights, formal equality, procedural fairness, preference aggregation, or interest group bargaining. Addressing domination and disavowal, they seek a language whose intensity and cadences perform what Douglass calls "scorching irony," to provoke self-reflection and to elevate the temperature of the body politic.
Civil religion and prophecy in the Obama moment

To return to interpretations of Obama, Jeremiah Wright belongs in this prophetic tradition, as much as Martin Luther King or Frederick Douglass. When Wright announced from his pulpit that god damns America, when he bore witness on behalf of those (whether Blacks or Palestinians) whose reality remains invisible to the enfranchised, and when he warned of the consequences of a house divided by domination or of imperial hubris, he was speaking in the prophetic mode of Amos and King. His loyalty is not to the state as such, to the exigencies of national interest, or to the nation as an imagined community, but to his god and to his people -defined not ethnically but politically as those cast out by power. He thus lives a divided loyalty fraught with productive tension. When he condemns racism and empire, he speaks as a critic not only of social injustice, but of idolatry as the worship of power and reification of identity, which must be chastened not validated. Such a figure, like King and Baldwin, will address the fate of an American whole by bearing witness to the experience and gifts of its excluded part, and thereby seek the mutual reconstitution of part and whole. But when he addresses his African-American

congregation as exiles in Babylon, he also speaks in a prophetic mode, just as his namesake addressed the Hebrews about making a life in exile.

Unlike King, Wright may not have effectively or consistently mediated between the civic or constitutional, and the prophetic; likewise he may not have effectively mediated between the two sorts of appeal characteristic of black prophecy in America, one to a white majority blinded by willful innocence, who call themselves a chosen people in a promised land, and the other to subalterns living as strangers in a strange land. He may be devoted to redeeming, not so much America, as its outcasts. But given Bercovitch's argument about the hegemony of civil religion, we need to credit the value and indeed courage in refusal of American exceptionalism, which allows figures like Wright to question the exclusions entailed by liberalism, and the idolatry entailed by capitalism and nationalism. He thus continued a powerful strand in the tradition of Black prophecy in America, and he spoke it in recognizable registers of an imperative and judging voice seeking decision and action. His example, like William Barber in North Carolina, seem a crucial corrective to the "success gospel" that has captured the black church during the long "post-civil rights" era.

To inquire about Obama's relation to "prophecy," therefore, is to explore not only the "content" of what he said, but how he said it. His repudiation of Wright -and his use of civil religion- must be read in both regards. Surely, Obama was working with and within the civil religion that Bellah and Bercovitch identified with opposed intentions. He invoked liberal tropes of individualism and mobility as he identified specifically as the child, not of slaves, but of an immigrant who embodies the American dream of self-making. He thereby tried to avoid being consigned to blackness, and so to social fixity, deviance, ethnic particularity, and political marginality, while sacralizing liberal nationalism as embodying the very meaning of freedom. At the same time, however, he also affirmed the collective responsibility that Bellah considered the gift of biblical religion to Anglo-American liberalism. Rather than speak in the "prescribed ritual form" of the jeremiad, depicting decline from or corruption of origins, he narrated a story of "more perfect union" in which the gap between national ideals and actual practices would be closed by incremental reforms.

In his accounts of "more perfect union" Obama joined citizens together in a community committed to foster the flourishing individuality of every member, even as he defended making membership both inclusive and diverse. He thus acknowledged and mediated both the promise of individual freedom and the obligations of civic membership. He also confirmed the normative (moral) structure beneath liberal individuality when he denounced the "irresponsibility" of wall street in the banking crisis, but also of black men who fail as fathers. He affirmed the conventional moral axioms that, by distinguishing liberty from license, embed individual rights in norms of responsibility. In turn, he affirmed the essential goodness of inherited American values. In these ways he reaffirmed the consensual faith that indeed seems to join white and blacks despite inverted views of racism and its persistence. In the soaring rhetoric in his victory and inaugural speeches, in his Philadelphia address repudiating Wright, and in his speech honoring Selma protest, Obama depicted the onward march of American "democracy," making the civil rights movement one step in the telos of "our" progress toward "more perfect union." he thus proposed a progressive version of American exceptionalism, which evoked but chastened a nationalism called to serve ethical universalism.

It is just as evident that, as he drew on tropes of civil religion, he distanced himself from its prophetic variant. He invoked King as a Moses, and made marching toward a mountaintop a national narrative of progressive reform, but he never announced god's judgment of a guilty

people, or demanded that people make fateful choices to overcome social practices long deemed legitimate. He did not speak in the voice of scorching irony, of grievance and righteous indignation, that animates prophetic critics of the American regime. To win election he neither offered a tragic retelling of American nationhood, nor demanded a decision about constitutive but unjust practices; he instead affirmed the redemptive promise of American exceptionalism. Joining immigrant mobility and national celebration to minimize racial division, while making his election the sign of racial progress, his narrative elicited unprecedented electoral support.

Obama demonstrated the possibility that the language of civil religion can be put to progressive use to authorize more inclusive state policies. As Bellah argued to students in 1968, it seemed to ward off marginality, in Obama's case the danger of being reduced to a "black" candidate, that is, merely the representative of a narrowly particular and indeed stigmatized minority. He could claim to stand for the whole because his language joined civic nationalism and the individualistic aspiration of so many, while he personally embodied the dream of more perfect union reconciling every element of a divided nation. Indeed, Obama not only "used" the tropes of civil religion, but himself performed its deepest aspirations in a way that solicited identification with him as a symbol of national possibility. But this consensual politics also meant renouncing partisanship -not only the conflicts and ideologies of the past -represented by "the 60s," the Clintons, and Jeremiah Wright, but also stoked by Republicans now. Obama's "pragmatism," his resistance to "ideology" was the necessary supplement to his poetry of national redemption. His wager was that the language of civil religion would enable a black man to win election, but also authorize pragmatic governing that sought and affirmed dominant terms of legitimation.

It seems totally unjustified, therefore, for Obama's supporters to claim he fulfilled the prophetic project of Martin Luther King. True, Obama could not have been elected without the civil rights movement and the enormous and complex changes it initiated, including the widespread but false presumption that we are now a "post-racial" nation. But he was a consensus politician: he did not admit let alone oppose imperialism but took on war in Afghanistan and intensified drone warfare; he did not challenge capitalism, but saved wall street in ways that provoked incredibly consequential populist rage; he did not condemn pervasive poverty, but talked only about the middle class. He sought to make American power more effective -as if to stave off national decline- by making it morally credible in global public opinion. Rather than embrace non-violence, he was commander-in-chief justifying and deploying the most powerful military in history. He surely was critical of laissez-faire excess, of hubris that forgoes diplomacy, and of conceptions of nationhood openly hostile to difference -and after Trump, these positions and gestures do not seem minor. But Obama never stood with god and the disenfranchised to demand justice, to call down god's judgment on a guilty people, or to demand profound changes in fundamental practices. Rather, his poetry of national redemption served the prose of his pragmatism, and his evocation of defining choices was modulated by tones of moderation, compromise, and forbearance.

Three issues seem important to note here. One is the terms on which Obama's critics on the left have identified his limitations. Some emphasize the grip of "neo-liberalism" on his policies, linked to a "technocratic" methodology and elite orientation. This critique has been justifiably extended to Hillary Clinton, but I am emphasizing his progressive form of civil religion, whose terms of legitimacy entailed a pragmatic incrementalism that promised to overcome partisanship. In retrospect, it seems like the universalism of his political poetry elicited greater hopes than he could satisfy by his actual policies and approach to policy; this discrepancy

between his poetry and his prose, so to speak, generated intense attachment and disappointment from progressives and the left, because he appealed to the universalism implicit in the civil religion, but was never able to address the structural contradictions -race, capitalism, and empire- that King came to identify as both its basis and its undoing. In sum, to emphasize only his "neo-liberalism," then, is to miss the sources of his appeal, and his contradictions.

The second issue concerns the premises governing how we judge Obama's relation to civil religion and prophecy. For we could affirm -praise and defend- his distance from prophetic forms of speech as the condition of approaching the world in a truly "political" way -as Hillary later argued to Black Lives Matter activists. We thus could celebrate his gifts as a "prince" in a Machiavellian sense. After all, he built legitimacy for a relatively progressive social policy in a political community that remains profoundly Christian, structurally divided by class, pervasively racist in its social practices and unstated cultural axioms, invested -across class and racial lines- in the "American Dream" of individual mobility and in nationalism. His brilliant political performance enabled him, as a black man, to win the presidency twice in a racially divided nation. His evocation of civil religion, but not prophetic critique, was essential to his electoral success and to any of his successes in implementing a progressive policy agenda.

Indeed, we could intensify the contrast with MLK, by affirming how Obama as supremely "political," a virtuoso performer of the art of the possible. Against the norms of prophecy, we could repeat Lincoln's arguments against the abolitionists: an elected official in a democracy is obliged to recognize multiple authorities: the authority of morality, by which slavery was what Lincoln called "absolute wrong;" but also the authority of the constitution, which legalized slavery in the southern states and included a fugitive slave law; and in addition the authority of majority rule and public opinion in a democracy. Moreover, Lincoln argued, if claims to abstract equal rights, however morally valid, simply ignore the reality of inherited historical circumstance and culture, then such claims entail violent change in the name of the right. The alternative to violence is building consensus for a position, even one that a political leader deems self-evidently right.

It is no wonder that Obama identified with Lincoln, therefore, but it is no wonder, too, that heirs of Frederick Douglass -most obviously Cornell West- drew on traditions of prophecy to press his administration in more radical directions, to condemn it for drone violence and deportation, timidity on racial injustice, failure on material inequality. This move -as it were from civic nationalism to prophecy- emerges only seeking critical distance from the nation-state and those it enfranchises, from its normative institutions and their axiomatic assumptions. According to this move, political community needs its prophets and their counter-narratives to contest idolatry, inertia, and willful ignorance -as well as incremental pragmatism. Indeed, as political theorist Jacques Ranciere argued, the truly political moment occurs when "the part that has no part" compels a regime to acknowledge the history and realities, the practices and people it has disavowed, a re-cognition and coming-to-terms that requires a regime's reconstitution. In just this sense, prophecy is not the antithesis of politics but its very condition of possibility. A defense of prophetic critique -of prophetic critique as "political" in a deep and true sense- does not preclude appreciating Obama's extraordinary performance, and the very real gains he enabled by working within (not overtly contesting) the culture's central myths.

Debates about Obama, therefore, posit a relationship between "politics" and "prophecy" that depends on definition in a not-trivial sense. Rather than insist on irreducible opposition, it seems important not to split off prophetic voice from the conventional (i.e. electoral and legislative) practice of politics, even its implication in state power and violence. Rather than split

off the perspective of prophecy from the virtuosity that faces the exigencies of power, consensus-building, and compromise, let us take up the difficult task of holding them in ongoing tension. As Max Weber argued in "Politics as a Vocation,"

...it is immensely moving when a mature man -no matter whether old or young in years- is aware of responsibility for the consequences of his conduct and really feels such responsibility with heart and soul. He then acts by following an ethic of responsibility, but somewhere he reaches a point where he says: Here I stand I can do no other."....In so far as this is true, an ethic of responsibility and an ethic of ultimate ends are not absolute contrasts but rather supplements, which only in union constitute a genuine man, a man who can have a "calling for politics."

Of course, some claim that Obama sustained just this tension, while here I argue otherwise. He failed to vigorously defend egalitarian principles in ways that credited both a common crisis in political economy and continuing racial disparity, and he failed to mobilize support for open conflict with unrelentingly hostile domestic adversaries. He was not able or willing to link the universalism civil religion to a critical -prophetic- mobilization on behalf of greater equality, against both increasing economic inequality and racial disparity. Of course, shadows of prophecy appear when he deflates chauvinist nationalism, notes that only the U.S. has dropped an atomic bomb, registers human fallibility, or credits how interdependence allows individual achievement. Still, a combination of technocratic focus, consensual style, and narrative failure allowed the adversaries of equality to advance the divisive narrative that enabled Donald Trump's electoral victory.

To debate the relation of prophecy and politics in the case of Obama thereby leads us to our present moment. Given the enraged and hysterical blowback to his election and his presidency, seething underground and overtly organized, it seem important to ask: does democratic possibility in fact depend on addressing directly -not avoiding, minimizing, or sanitizing- the precarity, anxiety, and ghosts that haunt the American house? How do we assess the progressive iteration of civil religion, and the place of prophecy, after Trump's election?

Civil Religion and Prophecy in the Trump Moment

My concluding reflections are meant to be suggestive, because it is too soon to make any credible claims about the future viability of historic forms of civil religion, and of its prophetic alter-ego. But I can offer some ideas with confidence.

First, there is the matter of context, to explain Donald Trump's electoral victory. On the one hand, it seems clear that Obama's technocratic (neo)liberalism did not address ongoing wage stagnation and increased precarity wrought by thirty years of globalization, which crystallized as a crisis in 2008 and the depression thereafter. On the other hand, the cultural fallout from massive migration (since the quota system was abandoned in 1965) was crystallized by the election of a black man, and renewed and intensified the defensive, angry identity politics of whites perceiving economic and cultural displacement. Unlike any other Republican primary candidate, Donald Trump capitalized on the failure of elites, repeated disappointment in the Democratic Party, anxiety about livelihood and the future, and racial rancor. He exploited the wide gap between conventional political language, and pervasive perception of elite disconnection -a gap that also diminished turnout for Hillary Clinton. Across the globe that gap has allowed racialized nationalisms -mistakenly called populist by the media- to emerge. While it is true that Hillary Clinton won the popular vote, and that voter suppression made a difference, I would emphasize a crisis in political language, and a disconnect between political elites and pervasive experiences of precarity, as crucial enabling conditions for Trump's electoral success.

At the same time, it is also crucial to see that in American history, experiences of precarity and anxiety about the future among whites have been organized repeatedly by racial tropes and demonizing aliens. The challenge in grasping our moment, therefore, is mediating increased inequality among whites and disparity across the color line as underlying circumstance, but also mediating the ways that Trump embodies both unprecedented changes and recurring historical patterns.

In this context, second, what is the current cultural status of historic forms of civil religion? It seems that Trump rejects its key tropes. He does speak a jeremiad of national decline, a recurring narrative in our history. In the name of restoring lost "greatness" it offered an "America First" politics equating national survival with the defense of whiteness and economic potency against demonized aliens, parasitic allies, and corrupt elites. His rhetoric abandons the universalistic "creed" that Obama evoked, and that historically has authorized American nationalism. Trump does not promise to lead the world (by multi-lateral alliances and "open door" trade policies) in ways that secure our own interests, but depicts zero-sum conflicts in which there are neither steady allies nor widely shared (albeit unequal) benefits. He also rejects the universalist language of civil religion, which has justified but contained social reform in liberal terms, so that incremental inclusion seemed possible and no break with the past seemed necessary. Trump does not "expand his base" by universalizing rhetoric, say by drawing immigrant generations to conservative views of upward mobility and "family values," like the younger George Bush. Instead he mobilizes whites against immigration, demonizes political adversaries, and supports voter suppression to overcome a limited demographic base. He thus repudiates not only the narrative form and redemptive promise in civil religion, but the historic "norms" it authorized, whether civility across party lines, professions of respect for the rule of law, deference to established institutions, and appearances of commitment to racial impartiality.

Trump rejects the most important legitimating tropes and norms of civil religion -creedal faith in the universality embodied by a city on a hill, in the rule of impartial law, in the fundamental fairness of representative government, the innocence of American power, and the abiding goodness of the American people. As Bercovitch argued, American jeremiads typically narrate crisis or decline in ways that produce reaffirmation of this faith, but Trump instead embodies a wholly transactional politics of narrowly self-interested deal-making. If we say that American elites never actually operated by the creedal faith they professed, we approach the idea that Trump is able to reject or ignore it precisely because of pervasive cynicism and rage, that is, because of (a sense of) its hollowness. He embodies that rage and cynicism; he performs "the ugly truth" hidden by the pretenses that have always secured elite interests. Indeed, the shock, horror, and judgment of established media serve his persona, validate the very transgressions that authorized his rule and give pleasure to his base.

Accordingly, Trump can reject civil religion because it has entered a time of crisis, precisely during the presidency of a figure who masterfully preformed its poetry, but in the context of permanent war, economic decline, and racialized anxiety.

A variety of theorists depict this crisis. Wendy Brown depicts how "neo-liberal rationality," which puts every relations and practice in market terms, has eviscerated "liberal democratic" values associated with common membership, public goods, civic life. For Aziz Rana, the creedal faith in the goodness and the effectiveness of American national power has been undone, by endless war in the middle east, and by thirty years of economic stagnation. For Greg Grandin, the myth of the frontier, which promised endless economic growth and a "limitless" freedom for human creativity, is also in crisis. Whereas this mythos long supported an

exceptionalism promising exemption from history and sedimented inequality, the frontier -as a porous threshold and endlessly receding horizon- is replaced by a wall, a walled state.

My own sense is that we have entered a moment in which neo-liberal ideology is greatly weakened in its legitimacy and rhetorical effect; it is no longer the only form of common sense governing judgment and conduct because it has been rendered visible, explicit, and contestable. It has been inscribed institutionally over the last thirty years, but it is no longer the only legitimating language in politics as forms of the civic, collective, and democratic are being vigorously articulated and defended in energizing, contagious ways, as ordinary people across many demographic lines act publically, many for the first time. "Public opinion" is up for grabs in a profound way. If announcements of the death of liberal nationalism and civil religion seem premature, we have entered what Gramsci called an "interregnum between old and new gods," rife with "morbid symptoms" but also with emergent possibilities to articulate and materialize. To avoid the existential uncertainty of the moment, people are likely to turn to and revive inherited genres, what Karl Marx called "the resurrection of the dead." While he distinguished between "tragedy" and "farce" because some resurrections productively engaged a historical moment, whereas others were forms of avoidance, he also proposed a "poetry of the future" that would embrace "the new." How, then, is our moment conceptualized and engaged during this highly charged presidential election in which Donald Trump seeks a second term?

One powerfully amplified voice in the Democratic Party and media argues that Trump is merely an anomaly, that we can return to "normal," i.e. to liberal nationalist universalism, "the creed" that has defined American exceptionalism. "This is not who we are," they say. This voice denies that Trump's election is a symptom of our historical liberalism, of its genocidal, racist foundations, its ongoing exclusions, and its hollowness. But if Trump is a symptom of that history, how is universalism being re-imagined? In what relation to earlier forms of liberal democracy, constitutional government, or welfare state liberalism? What terms (rhetoric or genre) is available or emerging to advance democratic values? What kinds of recoveries and re-workings are modeled and encouraged? How is "the new" appearing?

Candidates (and elites) will propose to renew or regenerate the creedal claims of the civil religion committed to liberal nationalism. It is as if the ordinary or normal insists on itself, as if people cannot help but submit to its demand to make Trump an exception or momentary interruption in the historically progressive trajectory of American nationalism. It is not just Biden who bears and affirms this demand; generational candidates (say Kamala Harris and Corey Booker) remain entirely conventional in undertaking presidential politics disconnected from social movement organizing; candidates of affect (Beto and Mayor Pete) model the affect of civility, as if its hollowness was not rooted in entrenched structures. Only Sanders and Warren openly address social structures of unequal wealth and power. But whereas Sanders tends to thunder denunciation while avoiding complexity, Warren actually engages details and produces plausible policies. Still, both foreground the interdependence and mutual obligation of citizens, a universalizing ethic to mitigate or enlarge the claims of ethnos. Neither invokes novelty; both in effect resume a New Deal project -including a "green new deal" but in FDR's model they use a pervasive sense of crisis to justify unprecedented programs.

No more than Roosevelt, though, do Sanders and Warren speak a "prophetic" language. They condemn injustice in militant even strident tones, and demand radical, i.e. systemic, change. But their language of plans and programs, even as a response to systemic injustice, is essentially pragmatist in orientation, prosaic or realist in its genre character; they summon a social movement, but to "fix" what is wrong, and make things right. They do reverse the big

government epithet, but on behalf of other axiomatic assumptions about individual rights, jobs, and the good life long associated with the American Dream -going back as it were behind Reagan to Roosevelt (skipping LBJ's divisive "Great Society.") Unlike prophets, they find external targets to blame, and as a result they do not call for people to transform themselves and their constitutive practices; rather, government (tax) policy and regulatory state power will change a political economy ruined by elites.

Don't get me wrong, I totally support these articulations of a social democratic politics to remake the meaning of universalism. But if we think of climate change or abolition, and the systemic and cultural transformations required of us, we get closer to elements of the prophetic voice I would delineate. In genre terms, what would we expect? First, the claim that there is no credible way to return to or resume normality because the ordinary is deranged. Prophets announce that we are undergoing -but disavowing- a radical change in, indeed the end of our world as we have known it. They inhabit multiple temporalities to depict a tragic historical arc, while prefiguring what lies beyond it if we "amend our ways." Second, prophets bear witness, standing with the realities and the people whose disavowal has been constitutive of the society they address; if acknowledgment means transformation of ourselves, our relations, our world, so they also bear witness to our capacity to change. They point not only to social injustice premised on disavowing those we depend on, but also to the idolatry -of power and wealth, states and nations- that disavows the limitations and interdependence defining the mortal human estate. Third, we hear warnings that refusal of acknowledgment and failure to change create disaster, even as they ask if accumulating consequences already make their intervention too late -for us. Lastly, their poetry thus dramatizes suffering and models transformation, but also laments the tragedy of self-destruction even as it envisions a futurity beyond it. These claims suggest I am prescribing a formula, but I mean to suggest genre markers by which to notice (let alone judge) the character of the political speech we hear in a moment when uncertainty -also pain, rancor, and urgency- must be metabolized into conditions of possibility.

In the week before the June 019 primary debates among democratic candidates, I heard elements of a prophetic voice in a context that signals the openness of this moment, and the potential place of prophecy in it. I am referring to the hearing on reparations held in Congress, and to Tanahesi Coates "testimony." In response to the classic liberal individuaism of Senate Majjority Leader Mitch McConnell, who denied any responsibility for slavery he cast as a discrete, past event, Coates bore witness to the disavowed dependence of the American republic -of its literal worldly existence let alone its prosperity- on exploiting black labor and violently terrorizing black people. Against the dis-embodiment by which liberalism extracts individuals from both society and history, Coates depicted history as a constitutive and ongoing "inheritance," alive and consequential in the present. He thereby embedded the living in history, as its heirs, albeit positioned differentially, as those disavowed or enfranchised by history thus far. Like Warren, he registered the staggering disparity in wealth between white and black, but as a legacy of ongoing white disavowal of racial domination. But rather than say "I have a plan," he was doing a different kind of work -to acknowledge injustice and harm, and, to think through what repair requires, what it might mean for whites and blacks and for the nation as a whole.

As a result, Coates articulated in moving language the implicit assumptions animating the programs of Warren and Sanders: "we are citizens, and thus bound to a collective enterprise that extends beyond our individual and personal reach. It would seem ridiculous to dispute invocations of the founders, or the greatest generation, on the basis of a lack of membership in either group," as if the speaker had to be there. Rather, "we recognize our lineage as a

generational trust, as inheritance." We inherit what they did; they made the world we inherit and bear in trust, as they did by the conduct we now honor. The "we" here is "citizens" of this specific nation: He does not invoke an ideal nation to live up to, like Lincoln, but like Baldwin, defines the nation as the history of its constitutive relations. He thus rejects what he calls "fair-weather patriotism," but depicts "this nation" as "both its credits and debits. That if Thomas Jefferson matters, so does Sally Hemmings. If D-Day matters, so does black wall street. If Valley Forge matters, so does Fort Pillow." The question is not "whether we will be tied to the something of our past, but whether we are courageous enough to be tied to the whole of them." These passages seem the most truly Baldwinian of anything Coates has written. Whereas he typically does not invoke a common belonging or shared civitas, but only white predation and blacks as prey, here -at a Congressional hearing, in the people's house- he sustains Baldwin's double-voiced tension in relation to the nation, citizenship, and whites. He does not invoke a redemptive narrative in which reparations could ever do justice or remove our original sin. He does not invoke Obama's teleological narrative of progress. Rather, he invokes what Michael Rogin called "negative exceptionalism" by making racial domination and its disavowal the distinctive, decisive, and ongoing element in OUR history. That "our" signals, at once, whites and their "fair-weather" story, the disavowed history of blacks, and their relation (call it the nation) over time. The our signals both disparate experiences, but also an inclusive political (not ethnic) identity because no one -black or white- is exempt from the consequences of history, its credits and debits.

That people are embedded in and entwined by history is the key idea that Bellah drew from a civil religion whose awareness of sin and limitation might be a resource by which to contest or chasten the fantasy of limitless freedom in liberal individualism and the frontier myth. For Bellah, the possibility of a progressive nationalism -and a vibrant res publica or civic culture- rest on cultivating and passing on this historical, social, ethical sense. And we can see, therefore, why or how Baldwin and Coates remain legible because of it, even though both are overtly atheist. The language of "inheritance" poses a political risk, because it seems to define action only as reaction, as mere derivation, as if people are defined only by descent, but Baldwin typically paired it with an idea of "birthright" to suggest the creative capacity to initiate that Arendt called natality. If Arendt's version of natality risked abstract or disembodiment, as if our capacity to begin is separated from(the bond with) the mother, Baldwin argued both that human beings are engendered, and that we make use of our past, as if springing from it, but also refusing, overcoming or reworking it as we re-narrate its meaning for us now, in the present.

I take Coates as modeling a political -because prophetic- voice. I hear him reading the Donald Trump event back into American history, to register the ways in which it is symptomatic of truly historic patterns, and of political impasse and culture war since 1968. To offer such epic and tragic narration of history, to impel collective self-reflection, is the vocation of prophecy in this nation. It seems crucial but absent in both political speech and media commentary now. My assumption and my claim is that the grip of this bloody and haunting history, as well as the causes and impact of this Trump event must be narrated and acknowledged if we are to make our current crisis a condition of possibility, of creative action. Coates' public testimony, therefore, is auspicious, indicative of the possibility whose conditions he cultivates by his speech. Likewise Trump has not only demoralized people for we also see energized politics, pervasive and intense participation as well as contest, a ground-level renewal of democratic ideals and practices, what I would call popular prophecy in action. What Martin Buber argued about biblical prophecy

remains pertinent: rather than predict a future, this voice dramatizes and models a capacity for decision in the fierce urgency of the now.

Concluding comments on this course on political theology

Mark Twain said your education is what you remember after you've forgotten everything. in the case of this course, you will forget all the details and specifics, but I hope you will remember:
reading POETICALLY
thinking POLITICALLY

I hope you will imagine that political 'theory' or 'theology' can be oriented, not toward the philosophical validation of claims about justice, freedom, morality, or the good life -not toward definitions on which to finally 'found' a community - but rather toward illuminating the ("political") dilemmas and challenges in human experiences of living with others, in time, through symbolic (mytho-poetic) forms, and by fate-ful choices, commitments, and actions.

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