

Israel/Today's Believers and the Nations: Three Test Cases

Ralph W. Klein

*Dean and Christ Seminary-Seminex Professor of Old Testament
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago Editor of Currents in
Theology and Mission*

Among the many highlights of his long presidency at LSTC, William E. Leshar has excelled in the "globalization" of theological education. Back in the 1980s he sought ways to develop the seminaries and colleges of Africa so that they might be ready to prepare leaders for their growing churches. Subsequently, he headed up the Globalization Task Force of the Association of Theological Schools and helped North American seminaries relate their curricula to issues like the omnipresence of poverty in the world, the contributions of the other great world religions, and the meaning of mission under these conditions. He not only supported an expanded scholarship program for the many international doctoral students at LSTC, but he also recognized and attended to their physical needs and welcomed their contributions to theological discussions. Under his leadership a Hispanic Ministries Program was started, and now flourishes.

This essay explores the theme of globalization by reviewing three occasions

when Israel's life intersected with that of its neighbors, and when its response to these "others" was characterized by ambivalence and ambiguity and by courageous hope that would not settle for the status quo. While none of these test cases has an exact modern counterpart, these struggles by the biblical writers to do justice, practice loyalty, and to live humbly (Mic 6:8)—toward God and the nations—may help us all to develop a theology and ministry appropriate to the 21st century.

The case of Jonah

Forget about his boat ride and the fish for now, and consider instead Jonah's activity in the city of Nineveh. The book of Jonah makes Nineveh bigger than Chicago—it took a person three days to walk across (3:3). And Jonah's eight word sermon (five in Hebrew) contained neither law nor gospel, only doom: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" The king of Nineveh recognized a crisis when he saw

one and immediately went into mourning and imposed total abstinence from food and water on the entire human population and on the animals. He ordered the people and the animals to put on sackcloth for mourning, to pray, and to change their violent lifestyles (3:6-9). He was willing to wager that God would relent and change his mind if he saw the city in repentance. Surely, God would not decide to carry out his judgment on those who recognized their sinfulness. The king won his bet: God did change his mind (3:10).

To understand this story, one has to remember two things about Nineveh. First, Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, and it richly deserved a reputation for cruelty in war and excessive punishment in its criminal justice system. An Assyrian man who charged his wife with adultery could cut off her nose and castrate the man whom he suspected (ANET 181). Second, Assyria destroyed the Northern Kingdom in 721 B.C.E. and nearly finished off Judah when Sennacherib invaded Judah in 701 B.C.E. Citizens of the ancient Near East in general and Israelites in particular did not feel kindly disposed toward Nineveh.

Jonah was outraged at the undeserved forgiveness shown to Nineveh by God and felt vindicated in his original decision not to go to Nineveh at all. He knew it all along: Yahweh was gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in loyal love, and ready to change his mind about imposing judgment on cities like Nineveh. Jonah asked God, who had just restored the Ninevites to life, to take his own life from him (4:2-3). Instead, God appointed a miraculous bush to grow up in one day and give Jonah shade, and then God appointed a worm to attack the bush and destroy it. God's third appointment brought a sultry east wind to blow against Jonah. That wind and the hot sun were enough to cause Jonah to ask for

death a second time (4:6-8).

"Is anger the right response, Jonah?" God asked.

"I'm so mad that I would just as soon die," Jonah replied (4:9).

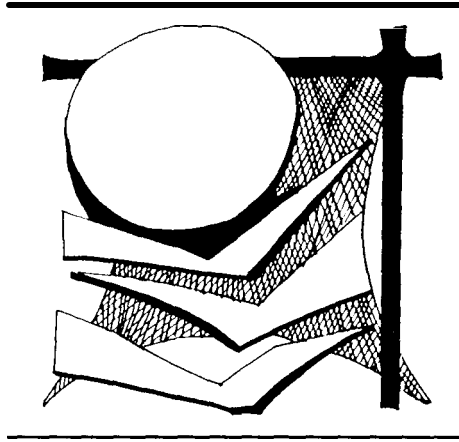
"You showed compassion for the bush, on which you did not work and which you did not make grow. It shot up in one night and perished in one night. Should I not show compassion for that great metropolis, Nineveh, in which there are more than 120,000 people who don't know the difference between their right and left hands, not to mention their many animals?" (4:10-11)

Yahweh tells us that Jonah showed compassion for the plant qua plant and contrasts that with his own behavior. While Yahweh had responded positively to the repentance of Nineveh in chapter 3, in the last verse of the book he shows compassion on Nineveh simply because it is a big city, a dumb city at that, and one with a lot of animals. Readers can choose between a theology of repentance and a theology of compassion, or they can decide that both are right.

The book of Jonah ends with a rhetorical question. It really does not matter how Jonah might have answered Yahweh's question since it is we the readers who are put on the spot. What does this open-ended question at the end of Jonah say to us about a theology of mission or a theology of the religions? Is it right for Yahweh to show compassion?

The case of Dinah

The story of Dinah in Genesis 34 does not let the reader off any easier. If she was raped by a foreigner named Shechem, as a majority of commentators believe, the compassionate reader notes a number of strange, even hideous turns of events. We never hear, for example, what Dinah thought of



the incident or the haggling about a marriage price that went on between her attacker and his father, on the one hand, and her father and brothers, on the other. Shechem seems to be the completely abusive male, having his own way sexually and then professing his love and many "sweet nothings" to the one he has violated (v. 3). For most of the story Dinah seems to have stayed with Shechem (v. 17, v. 26), the very man who had attacked her. Her father Jacob seems either weak and indecisive when he waits for his sons to come home before doing anything himself (v. 5), or he only is worried about his own reputation when his hot-headed sons murder all the men in the foreign city, pillage all its goods, and kidnap the city's wives for themselves (vv. 25-29). Dinah seems to be a classic victim of rape or even of date rape. The story in this telling offers no helpful words for female—or male—readers. We all do well to be angry about this incident.

There is an alternate interpretation of the story that allows us to enter the discussion at another point. In this telling, the issue is not about rape at all but about whether we the readers are ready to be open to the "other." **Dinah models such openness**

since she voluntarily goes out to visit the; women of the region (v. 1). The crux of this interpretation rests in the translation of v.2. No one denies that Shechem "took her" and "lay with her," but the NRSV's addition of "by force" may miss the whole point. What was controversial about the sexual liaison of Shechem and Dinah is that it brought shame or defilement on Dinah, at least in the view of some of the characters in the story, because it was a relationship that crossed ethnic boundaries.

Shechem and his father Hamor actually live up to their royal stature (v. 2) by offering to pay a bride price without any limits (v. 12) and by eagerly agreeing to persuade the men of their town to be circumcised in order to facilitate marital and economic relationships (vv. 18-24). Shechem, the cross-cultural pioneer, was the most honored person in his family (v. 19). Jacob is cautious, but finally a public, if passive, advocate of breaking down ethnic barriers (v. 5, v. 30). Simeon and Levi are the really bad guys in this reading. They are indignant because their sister had crossed cultural boundaries (v. 7); they proposed circumcision to Shechem and Hamor deceitfully since they knew that this would give them a window of opportunity to attack Shechem's city when all the men were disabled by the operation's aftermath. They threatened to take Dinah back if Shechem and Hamor would not agree to their outrageous demand, only to take her back anyway when they double crossed their dialogue partners (vv. 17, 26). In addition to their murder and pillaging of the city, they kidnapped all the women they could. If there is rape in the story, they are the ones who do it.

This alternate, somewhat controversial reading permits a new understanding of the dilemma posed by the final verses of the chapter (vv. 30-31). As the ancestral re-

ceiver of the promise, Jacob, like Abraham and Sarah, is obligated to be a blessing to all the families of the earth (cf. Gen 12:1-3). No wonder he protests what his sons have done. Through their violent actions they have made the name Jacob stink to his Canaanite neighbors. Why would anyone look to him as someone blessed or someone able to be a blessing?

But Simeon and Levi have the last word: "Should our sister be treated like a whore?" (v. 31) The question is puzzling since prostitution was not the issue in either interpretation of the story. Some commentators argue that Shechem was in fact willing to pay (v. 12) and Jacob's family appeared willing to be paid even if their apparent bargaining was double-dealing (vv. 13-16). Bechtel argues, however, that the reference to a "whore" refers to the marginal status of Dinah in that society. A prostitute is a person who engages in sexual relations without the possibility of bonding to her sexual partners; they are merely customers. In the view of Simeon and Levi, this charge fit their sister. She was linked sexually to a foreigner Shechem, but in their view such a relationship was outlawed, incapable of consummation, a shame, yes, even pollution.

If this interpretation of the story is correct, readers are faced with a dilemma. The patriarch Jacob admonishes his sons for their refusal to cross ethnic boundaries and charges that their violence threatens the very life of the whole family. The brothers ask, "Should such cross-cultural relationships be carried on?"

As in Jonah, the final question goes unanswered. Ancient and modern readers must wrestle with two powerful arguments, one for inter-ethnic marriage (by Jacob), one opposed to it (by Simeon and Levi). Rather than resolving the issue, the author of Genesis 34 forces all subsequent readers

to debate, to rethink the implications of the faith, and then to make a choice.

The case of Nehemiah 9

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are not the first place one would normally look for a discussion of multiculturalism or globalization. Ezra 9-10 brings up the problem of intermarriage, and Ezra's solution is drastic and painful, hard to justify. He leads the community through a rite in which more than 100 men are forced to divorce their foreign wives and disown their children, resulting in personal and financial hardship. It is possible that Persian policy required this drastic action and that exogamous marriages could have threatened the community's right to the land, but such interpretations seem defensive. The canon as a whole is more welcoming to the outsider. The book of Ruth celebrates the character and piety of a remarkable Moabite woman and sees her incorporation in the ancestry of David as a decided credit to Israel's greatest king (despite Deut 23:3?). Some scholars, past and present, believe that the book of Ruth was written precisely to be a counter-argument to the actions of Ezra. Even elsewhere in Ezra and Nehemiah there is a much more positive attitude to outsiders who wanted to join the community (Ezr 6:21; Neh 10:28).

The overall environment at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah limited the political options for the post-exilic community. The principal authors of the books knew that rebellion against the Persian Empire would be foolish and suicidal. There is no talk in the book about a messiah or a new conquest of the land. Instead, Ezra 1 describes the Persian emperor Cyrus as a leader stirred up by Yahweh to issue a proclamation that authorized the Jews to return home from the Babylonian exile and to rebuild the temple.

When opponents tried to stop the temple building (chap. 4), the Jews appealed to the Persian king Darius, who checked his records and allowed the building to continue, with a generous subsidy from the empire itself (chap. 6). Ezra and Nehemiah

central political position of the rest of the book.

The prayer recites God's providential care in creation (v. 6), in the election of Abraham (vv. 7-8), and in the Exodus from Egypt (vv. 9-11). During all this time there was no hint of human infidelity. The next paragraphs describe God's providential care during the wilderness wanderings (vv. 12-15), the rebellions of the ancestors (vv. 16-18), and God's continued guidance in spite of their rebellion (vv. 19-21).

Verses 22-31 go onto review the life of the ancestors of the post-exilic community during their stay in the land. After the dramatically successful conquest (vv. 22-25), the people became disobedient and were punished, they prayed, and they received divine deliverance during the period of the judges (vv. 26-28). Life under the monarchy is described very briefly, but God's mercy and righteousness have endured down to the present day (vv. 29-31). Throughout their life in the land there was a cycle of sin and punishment, followed by petition and deliverance.

The final paragraph of chap. 9, speaking for the post-exilic community, asks for the cycle leading to deliverance to be resumed. First, there is a petition (v. 32), then a confession of sins (vv. 33-35), and finally a complaint about their present condition that functions as a kind of appeal for God to act, based on pity for them (vv. 36-37). In this last paragraph, the speakers admit **that** they have not served God and so they now have rightly become slaves (vv. 35-36). Ironically, the land God gave to the ancestors for enjoyment has become the place for their own enslavement. Because of taxation and tribute, the rich yield of this land now goes to the kings that have been imposed on them as punishment (contrast Ezr 1:1). These kings have "power over our bodies and over our livestock." While **the**

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were sent by Persian authorities to reform the community. Ezra's (re)introduction of the Pentateuch, if that is what his law book was in chap. 7, may have given this religious document official standing in the Persian empire. Ezra's and Nehemiah's activities in Jerusalem and Judah gave the Persians a safe outpost in the vicinity of always-rebellious-and-dangerous Egypt, and the Jews won the right for an undisturbed worship of Yahweh. It was a win-win situation for the Jews and the Persians, but the price was relatively high: for the sake of an undisturbed right to worship Yahweh in Jerusalem, the post-exilic community agreed to be a Persian colony.

While this is the overall tone of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, Nehemiah 9 offers another opinion. Here a new, anonymous voice, mistakenly identified as Ezra in the NRSV (v. 6), offers a great prayer of repentance (9:5b-37) that challenges the

speakers freely admit that they are sinners, they also acknowledge that they are in great distress (v. 37) and they beg God for relief.

Some people can tolerate foreign domination and make a virtue out of it, as did the principal authors of Ezra and Nehemiah. But at least for some within Israel, including the author of Nehemiah 9—and for many people today—such slavery could not be tolerated. The alien kings ruled the bodies and the cattle of those who prayed in chap. 9, in accord only with what was pleasing to these rulers.

What moves God to act? Is it our praise, his character, his promises? "You are the LORD, you alone" is the way the poem begins in v.6. But the poem ends with "we"—we the slaves, we the exploited, we who are in great distress (vv. 36-37). Is not God moved by pity for us? You, God, are one half of the issue; we are the other half. You and we—in that connection lies hope for the author of Nehemiah 9. This person could never settle for the miserable status quo and make a virtue of it; this person

demanded and expected divine intervention in the here and now. This "secondary hand" worked a spirit of liberation into an otherwise complacent text.

Conclusion

How we relate to others has never been an easy question. Nor is there in the Bible any glossing over the difficulties of communication across generations or across ethnic divisions. Theology and ministry in the 21st century CE., as in many centuries B.C.E., require a daring spirit that recognizes that God's greatest gift is the transcendence of all cultural, ethnic, political, and religious boundaries. Heirs of Bill Leshner will not just repeat his many global initiatives; they will take them to their logical, evangelical and ecumenical, conclusions or next steps. St. Paul still has it right: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).