

PEACE

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# UNDERSTANDING BIBLICAL THEMES

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# PEACE

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# CONTENTS

Preface	1
PART ONE: A VISION OF <i>SHALOM</i>	
1 Living toward a Vision	13
2 <i>Shalom</i> for “Haves” and “Have-Nots”	25
PART TWO: A VISION OF FREEDOM	
3 <i>Shalom</i> as Freedom and Unity	39
4 Action in the Brickyard	55
5 Our Story Tells Us What to Do	65
PART THREE: A VISION OF ORDER	
6 Ordering and Eating	75
7 Peace Is a Gift and a Task	87
8 Peace Is a <i>Shalom</i> Covenant	99
9 Mixing Religion and Politics	107
PART FOUR: THE <i>SHALOM</i> CHURCH	
10 The Church: An Untangled World	121
11 Newness: The Church’s Message	131
12 <i>Shalom</i> Tools	141
13 The <i>Shalom</i> Church	151

PART FIVE: *SHALOM* PERSONS

14	The <i>Shalom</i> Person	169
15	Teaching How It Holds Together	181
16	Health Care as Healing and Caring	191
	Scripture Index	201

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## PEACE

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### PREFACE

I am pleased that Jon L. Berquist at Chalice Press has agreed to republish this book, which has been out of print at the United Church Press for a spell. Although the papers in this book are to some extent dated, I hope and believe that they continue to have resonance for those in the church who care about public dimensions of the gospel and the ministry of the church. The papers given here are for the most part ad hoc presentations, offered orally in response to invitations in various church programs. Without being very intentional about it, it is clear in retrospect that my involvement in such ad hoc presentations, with an eye on missional “relevance,” set me on a course of interpretation that has characteristically bent me toward church practice; consequently, I have cared about but held loosely the more critical side of scholarship, in which one must of necessity engage if one is to be a responsible, informed interpreter. These essays indicate a sort of choice I have consistently exercised about the interface of the critical and the contemporary ecclesial facets of interpretation.

#### I

These essays, aimed at church practice, arose in a difficult time in U.S. society, the main contours of which are well known. The defining events in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s included

## 2 PEACE

the civil rights movement, featuring both Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X; the Vietnam War, which King had the temerity to link to civil rights, the Kennedy and King assassinations; and the Watergate scandal, which placed in jeopardy old patterns of institutional life. This cluster of events created a sense of openness to newness, a suspicion of old patterns of power, a resistance to old patterns of authority, and a fresh sense of the possible.

The theological manifestation of this peculiar time and theological response to it was one of hope that was more than a little tinged with romanticism. Perhaps the most typical or shaping influence was the book by Harvey Cox *The Secular City*, which was widely read in that context. Cox offered a celebrative reception of the secular that was something like “the dawning of the Age of Aquarius.” Cox’s sociotheology was echoed in popular form by Sister Coretta, who in the wake of Vatican II, made an industry out of producing banners with quasireligious affirmations about the new possibilities before us as old things were breaking open.

My church rootage is in the United Church of Christ, which in the 1960s was, at the national level, still in the mood of its initial euphoria, having been formed in 1957. That founding enthusiasm, moreover, was fed by the more general theological mood of the period. In its educational offerings, the national offices of the UCC had resolved to be intentionally avant-garde both in the visible appearance of its curriculum materials and in the theological assumptions and articulations that received a venturesomely fresh voicing. Among other things, the educational enterprise latched onto *shalom* as a symbol and mantra of a new wave of theological opinion and nurture. Although there was biblical and theological study behind the accent on *shalom*, it is fair to say that it became a popular slogan that came to signal all things new.

Specifically, appeal to *shalom* represented a commitment to the well-being of the world that was not to linger over churchy, parochial things; after the manner of Cox’s *secular*, the term *shalom* attested to God’s goodwill and transformative engagement for the sake of the world. The accent in the UCC, moreover, did not reflect long on God’s enactment of *shalom*; in characteristic UCC fashion, interpretation turned a theological accent into an ethical emphasis on *human* enactment of well-being in the world. Commitment to *shalom*, to which many of us gravitated passionately, was on the romantic side



and lacked a critical edge, a liberal propensity to think that if we all said well and we all did well, all would be well. The short shelf life of such romanticism is signaled by the fact that Cox himself soon moved sharply away from the secular and has since that time been pondering the depth, power, and rootage of particular theological and church traditions.

Thus, an embrasive *shalom* from that odd moment in our social history is to be assessed, I judge, as a great gain in a move beyond traditionalism. It was, however, a gain that was not critical of itself (and its romanticism) as it was so readily critical of tradition and traditionalism. An accent on *shalom*, as it turned out, eventuated in a kind of well-meaning theological liberalism that from a perspective of “post-liberal” theology seems thin indeed. But then, one cannot second-guess the theological work that is done in good faith and seriousness in another context, even if that other context is not far removed in time.

## II

Given that troubled time, given a more or less euphoric theological response to the troubled time, and given my own deep engagement at the time with the *shalom* accent of my church, I pondered then and have pondered much since then how different the course of our church life (and these essays) might have been had the large notion of *shalom* been more directly related to *mishpat*, that is, *justice*. It is of course a truism to say “no peace without justice,” or “no peace without justice first.” And perhaps that was all implied at the time in the term *shalom*, with *mishpat* as a subset of *shalom*. It was not, however, in any critical way recognized as a real and indispensable component of *shalom*. To ponder *shalom-cum-mishpat*, peace with and through justice, has led me to the following awarenesses:

1. In our account of *shalom*, a Jewish notion was happily appropriated that defied all the dualisms (especially worldly/religious) common in conventional thinking. But the Jewish reality of *shalom* as a work in progress always marked by fraction and incompleteness was lacking. If that Jewish realism and capacity for disjunction had been realized, our church use of the term might have been less romantic.

2. Taken by itself and without appropriate Jewish grounding, the notion of *shalom* lends itself to a passion for equilibrium, a sense of

#### 4 PEACE

system in which all the parts cohere. Such an innocent usage reflects a liberal propensity to settle for an organic view of social wholeness reflective of the social theories of Émile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons. On offer was a kind of wholeness that was unaware of the fact that every such “new world order,” in whatever scope, is always an order of privilege and commensurate exclusivism. A hope for a future well-being that quickly becomes a sort of “realized eschatology” tends not to reckon with the reality of evil as it shows up in exclusionary and exploitative social practice.

3. Given the unwitting commitment to a sociology of equilibrium, it would be fair to say that the bite of Marxian analysis was absent in the romantic euphoria of the moment. Of course, Marxian analysis could not be avoided by anyone who thought well and faithfully about the future. For the most part, however, these interpretive categories came late to church interpretation. Of course there arose about the same time the remarkable developments in Roman Catholic Latin American theology that centered in the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez.<sup>1</sup> That brave band of church theologians produced the astonishing formulations of Medellín and Puebla on “God’s preferential option for the poor.” And while liberal Protestant sympathies had long run in that direction, for the most part there was missing among us the focus and incisiveness of such a critical formulation. For myself, the turning point came with José Miranda’s *Marx and the Bible*<sup>2</sup> whose Marxian analysis was fleshed out in critical form by the magisterial work of Norman Gottwald, in *The Tribes of Yahweh*.<sup>3</sup> What had been intuitive and implicit in a liberal perspective was now made explicit and concrete; but for the most part that critical awareness did not yet connect to the liberal narrative of *shalom* in the mid-1970s that was still more wish and hope than hard, disciplined, critical resolve.

4. The “new world order” of *shalom* in the Christian Old Testament is largely a function of royal ideology. It deals in sweeping summaries from above. That is, it tends to be an ordering fostered by and beneficial to those in charge, characteristically the urban elite who managed the

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<sup>1</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973).

<sup>2</sup>José Miranda, *Marx and the Bible: The Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1974).

<sup>3</sup>Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250-1050 B.C.* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979; 2d ed., Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

advantages of wealth and technology.<sup>4</sup> Such a systemic perspective tends to run roughshod over the “details” of those who are not “with the program” and who therefore drop out of all statistical reassurances.

It is for that reason that *shalom* is not much on the lips of the criticizing prophets of ancient Israel, except in an occasional anticipatory utterance. Where the prophets engage in present tense social analysis, they do not use the term, for the term bespeaks a systems approach that defaults on “the less fortunate,” who are made less fortunate precisely by the romanticizing large-scale order of well-being. The prophets characteristically use the language of “justice and righteousness” that seldom celebrates present equilibrium, but that regularly advocates a disruption of the present equilibrium in more or less revolutionary fashion to redress the injustice that *shalom* covers over.

5. *Shalom* at its most critical can function as a theology of hope, a large-scale promissory vision of what will one day surely be. As a vision of an assured future, the substance of *shalom* is crucial, for it can be a resource against both despair and an overly eager settlement for an unfinished system. But when that vision of the future becomes “present tense,” and any present order is equated with that future, *shalom* inevitably results in a self-congratulatory distortion of the present. The most obvious case in point is Francis Fukuyama’s book *The End of History*, which equates present democratic capitalism with the largest human hopes.<sup>5</sup> But what Fukuyama crassly asserts on a global scale was also seductive in more modest church rhetoric that failed to maintain a clear distinction between present gifts and expected, promised well-being. Present gifts are always fractured and incomplete when confused with expectations.

### III

The occasion for writing this new introduction has been an opportunity for me to return to the texts on *shalom*, of which I will mention three that seem to me suggestive and important in light of the foregoing:

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<sup>4</sup>I refer, in the first instance, to “urban elites” in that ancient world of “Canaanite city-states.” But of course the category pertains in our contemporary reading and analyses as well.

<sup>5</sup>Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

## 6 PEACE

### 1. Psalm 85 ends with an immense promise:

Surely his salvation is at hand  
for those who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land.  
*Steadfast love* and *faithfulness* will meet;  
*righteousness* and *peace* will kiss each other.  
*Faithfulness* will spring up from the ground,  
and *righteousness* will look down from the sky.  
The LORD will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.  
*Righteousness* will go before him,  
and will make a path for his steps (vv. 9–13)

This vision of well-being gathers together Israel's remarkable vocabulary of fidelity (*steadfast love*, *faithfulness*, *righteousness*, *peace*), all of which will be enacted as God's "salvation."<sup>6</sup> That is, the future will be a gift of God's transformative, disruptive assertion. The future is indeed marked by *shalom*, but the *shalom* of verse 10 is situated in the covenantal terms of *steadfast love*, *faithfulness*, and *righteousness*. Insofar as *shalom* is a new order, it is a new order marked by the neighborly engagement of ground and sky, heaven and earth, God and people.

Behind the assurance, however, is the petition of verses 4–7:

Restore us again, O God of our salvation,  
and put away your indignation toward us.  
Will you be angry with us forever?  
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?  
Will you not revive us again,  
so that your people may rejoice in you?  
Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,  
and grant us your salvation.

That is, the oracle of vision is evoked by a prayer of petition out of present crisis. The prayer is voiced by people in dire straits; the rhetoric of "restore us again" in verse 4 may suggest exile. That setting is important because it means that there can be no confusion of present and future. *Shalom* marked by fidelity is promised, but it clearly is not in hand.

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<sup>6</sup>Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 223–24. See also Brueggemann, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 108–9.

2. The same promise to exiles is voiced in the prose assurance of Jeremiah 29:11–14:

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your *welfare* and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

This passage as well is a divine promise to Israel in exile. Israel's present tense is one of displacement and defeat. The oracle invites Israel to look past its present into a future grounded only in God's reliability. The specific content of that future is to come "back to the place," that is, a homecoming. The phrasing of "restore your fortunes" is parallel to Psalm 85:1. The concern here is that YHWH has a plan for your *shalom*, tellingly rendered in the NRSV as "welfare." The future is an assured well-being for the entire community that is a total contrast to the present, assured only by the trustworthiness of the one who promises.

3. Micah 5:2–5a, a text that occurs regularly in the church lectionary for Advent, anticipates *shalom* in a contested arena of power:

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,  
 who are one of the little clans of Judah,  
 from you shall come forth for me  
 one who is to rule in Israel,  
 whose origin is from of old,  
 from ancient days.  
 Therefore he shall give them up until the time  
 when she who is in labor has brought forth;  
 then the rest of his kindred shall return  
 to the people of Israel.  
 And he shall stand and feed his  
 flock in the strength of the LORD,  
 in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.  
 And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great

## 8 PEACE

to the ends of the earth;  
and he shall be the one of *peace*.

This text anticipates a peasant leader from Bethlehem who will rule and bring *shalom* to the realm. That leader, moreover, will confound even the Assyrian Empire. This passage, in subsequent reading, is clearly taken as “messianic.” In Israel’s own reading, the poem refers to a Davidic king. In Christian reading, it is an anticipation of Jesus. For our purposes it is enough to see that *shalom* is the work of a God-authorized human agent who will enact social welfare, security, and well-being in a way that is quite concrete and material.

All three texts attest to a new future that will displace a negative present tense. The contrast between now and then is also a contrast between a *context of despair* under imperial domination and a *coming context of assured well-being* in an environment of freedom. Attentiveness to this contrast of now and then is enough to protect against a “realized eschatology” that romantically collapses promised future into occupied present. The third text in particular bespeaks social criticism and analysis, for the peasant locus of *shalom* to be enacted contrasts sharply with the practice of urban elites who foster an ideology of undifferentiated present-tense *shalom*.

### IV

We are a good bit less romantic about promised well-being than we were in the uncritical euphoria at the time these essays were prepared. Now, however, in an ocean of consumer goods, we run the risk of being narcotized so that we do not notice the socioeconomic disparities that give the lie to “new world order.” My own church tradition at the national level is now immensely preoccupied with the sorry U.S. history of racism and offers as an antidote “multiculturalism.” It is possible to discern, however, that the current emphasis is almost exclusively on *political* redress of racism. At the same time, the church seems incapable of or unwilling to raise *economic* issues, perhaps because our church leadership (of which I am a part) is so economically advantaged as to make economic issues preferably unnoticed. The problem of singular focus on the *political* without the *economic* is that issues devolve to sheer matters of power, without a commensurate effort about shared destiny that requires a recovered communalism of cruelty and generosity concerned with fidelity as much as power.

However, if William Julius Wilson is in any way correct in his insistence that the major issues now concern *class* even more than *race*, a focus on political *shalom* without economic *mishpat* tends to conceal class issues.<sup>7</sup> And so I now wonder if perhaps my church tradition is at present replicating the uncritical practice of the 1970s, only this time the new world order (*shalom*) is “multicultural.” The question permits no single answer, but suggests that we will continue to be haunted, as are these essays, by the fact that the text characteristically shatters our preferred modes of management. The text runs beyond our frail powers of imagination and our lame courage before the “costs of discipleship” (to use Bonhoeffer’s familiar phrase). *Shalom* is still promised by God. Our capacity to await it, however, requires a greater attentiveness to our broken present than we are mostly wont to give; it is a brokenness that takes many forms and leaves all broken, not just some.

For all of that, I am glad for my membership in the United Church of Christ and for its continuing struggle for faithfulness. That struggle currently takes shape differently from that of the time of these essays. But, of course, the issues persist in all their intense demand. In my original preface to the book I named and thanked a number of people who nurtured me and the book. I still thank them along with many more recent comrades in the church. Among those, of course, Charles McCollough stands first for his long-term commitment to the book. Our technological society is currently against “the vision thing,” which is why our text work is so urgent, our embrace of it so subversive, and our readiness so hesitant.

Walter Brueggemann  
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Third Week in Lent, 2000

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<sup>7</sup>William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).





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PART ONE

**A Vision of *Shalom***





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# PEACE

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## 1

### LIVING TOWARD A VISION

*I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land. And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid; I will remove dangerous animals from the land, and no sword shall go through your land.*

LEVITICUS 26:4–6

*For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.*

EPHESIANS 2:14

The central vision of world history in the Bible is that all of creation is one, every creature in community with every other, living in harmony and security toward the joy and well-being of every other creature. *In the community of faith in Israel*, this vision is expressed in the affirmation that Abraham is father of all Israel and every person is his child (see Genesis 15:5; Isaiah 41:8; 51:2). Israel has a vision of all

people drawn into community around the will of its God (Isaiah 2:2–4).<sup>1</sup> *In the New Testament, the church* has a parallel vision of all persons being drawn under the lordship and fellowship of Jesus (Matthew 28:16–20; John 12:32) and therefore into a single community (Acts 2:1–11). As if those visions were not sweeping enough, the most staggering expression of the vision is that *all persons* are *children of a single family*, members of a single tribe, heirs of a single hope, and bearers of a single destiny, namely, the care and management of all God's creation.

That persistent vision of joy, well-being, harmony, and prosperity is not captured in any single word or idea in the Bible; a cluster of words is required to express its many dimensions and subtle nuances: love, loyalty, truth, grace, salvation, justice, blessing, righteousness. But the term that in recent discussions has been used to summarize that controlling vision is *shalom*. Both in such discussion<sup>2</sup> and in the Bible itself, it bears tremendous freight—the freight of a dream of God that resists all our tendencies to division, hostility, fear, drivenness, and misery.

*Shalom* is the substance of the biblical vision of one community embracing all creation. It refers to all those resources and factors that make communal harmony joyous and effective. Ezekiel in a visionary passage expresses its meaning:

I will make with them a covenant of *shalom* and banish wild beasts from the land, so that they may dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods. And I will make them and the places round about my hill a blessing; and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. And the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase, and they shall be secure in their land. They shall no more be a prey to the nations, nor shall the beasts of the land devour them; they shall dwell securely, and none shall make them afraid. And I will provide for them plantations of *shalom*. (Ezekiel 34:25–29a, author's translation)

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 501.

<sup>2</sup>See J. C. Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out*, trans. Isaac C. Rottenberg, *Adventures in Faith* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966); and Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, I-II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926), 263–65.

The origin and the destiny of God's people are to be on the road of *shalom*, which is to live out of joyous memories and toward greater anticipations.

This passage from Ezekiel and the one from Leviticus quoted at the beginning of the chapter show *shalom* in all its power. It is well-being that exists in the very midst of threats—from sword and drought and wild animals. It is well-being of a material, physical, historical kind, not idyllic “pie in the sky,” but “salvation” in the midst of trees and crops and enemies—in the very places where people always have to cope with anxiety, to struggle for survival, and to deal with temptation. It is well-being of a very personal kind—the address in Leviticus 26 is to a single person, but it is also deliberately corporate. If there is to be well-being, it will not be just for isolated, insulated individuals; it is, rather, security and prosperity granted to a whole community—young and old, rich and poor, powerful and dependent. Always we are all in it together. Together we stand before God's blessings and together we receive the gift of life, if we receive it at all. *Shalom* comes only to the inclusive, embracing community that excludes none.

The vision of wholeness, which is the supreme will of the biblical God, is the outgrowth of a covenant of *shalom* (see Ezekiel 34:25), in which persons are bound not only to God but to one another in a caring, sharing, rejoicing community with none to make them afraid.

### Dimensions of *Shalom*

The scope of this communal vision is an important element in understanding its power. In its most inclusive dimension it is *a vision encompassing all reality*, expressed in the mystery and majesty of creation images:

[without *shalom*]

The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. (Genesis 1:2a)

[with *shalom*]

The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze,  
 their young shall lie down together;  
 and the lion shall eat straw like the ox...  
 They will not hurt or destroy  
 on all my holy mountain. (Isaiah 11:6–7, 9a)

[from chaos to *shalom*]

A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped...and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. (Mark 4:37–39)

The Greek word translated *peace* here means *quiet* rather than *shalom*, but the passage still applies. The storm at sea represents all the same ominous, chaotic forces presented in Genesis 1:2. And the word of Jesus in Mark serves the same purpose as the hovering spirit of God in Genesis 1:2, namely, to bring fundamental disorder under God’s rule—into harmony—so that light, life, and joy become possible. Creation in Genesis and by Jesus (see Colossians 1:17) is the establishment of *shalom* in a universe that apart from God’s rule is disordered, unproductive, and unfulfilling.

In the same symbolic word, the messianic vision of Isaiah (11:6–9) is of a world in which creation is reconciled and harmony appears between children and snakes, among all kinds of natural enemies.<sup>3</sup> *Shalom* is creation time, when all God’s creation eases up on hostility and destruction and finds another way of relating. No wonder creation culminates in the peace and joy of the Sabbath (Genesis 2:1–4a) when all lie down and none make them afraid. No wonder our most familiar Sabbath blessing ends: “The LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace (*shalom*)” (Numbers 6:26), for the benediction is the affirmation of Sabbath, the conclusion of creation, when harmony has been brought to all the warring elements in our existence.

A second dimension of *shalom* is the *historic political community*. Absence of *shalom* and lack of harmony are expressed in social disorder as evidenced in economic inequality, judicial perversion, and political oppression and exclusivism. Of course, the prophets speak boldly against such disruption of community, which is the absence of *shalom*:

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 528–51.

Alas for those who devise wickedness  
 and evil deeds on their beds!...  
 They covet fields, and seize them;  
 houses, and take them away;  
 they oppress householder and house. (Micah 2:1–2)

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan,  
 who are on Mount Samaria,  
 who oppress the poor, who crush the needy,  
 who say to their husbands,  
 “Bring something to drink!” (Amos 4:1)

These offenses are viewed by the prophets not simply as ethical violations but as the disruption of God’s intention for *shalom*, the perversion of the community God wills for people in history. Their call is continually a call for righteousness and justice:

Seek good and not evil, that you may live;  
 ...Hate evil and love good,  
 and establish justice in the gate. (Amos 5:14–15a)

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;  
 remove the evil of your doings  
 from before my eyes;  
 cease to do evil,  
 learn to do good;  
 seek justice,  
 rescue the oppressed,  
 defend the orphan,  
 plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:16–17)

The doing of righteousness and justice results in the building of viable community, that is, *shalom*, in which the oppressed and disenfranchised have dignity and power.

Depart from evil, and do good;  
 seek peace (*shalom*), and pursue it. (Psalm 34:14)

Then justice will dwell in the wilderness,  
 and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.  
 The effect of righteousness will be peace (*shalom*),  
 and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.  
 (Isaiah 32:16–17)

The consequence of justice and righteousness is *shalom*, an enduring Sabbath of joy and well-being. But the alternative is injustice and oppression, which lead inevitably to turmoil and anxiety, with no chance of well-being (Isaiah 48:22; 57:21).

Jesus' ministry to the excluded (see Luke 4:16–21) was the same, the establishment of community between those who were excluded and those who had excluded them. His acts of healing the sick, forgiving the guilty, raising the dead, and feeding the hungry are all actions of reestablishing God's will for *shalom* in a world gone chaotic by callous self-seeking.

The cosmic and historical-political aspects of *shalom* point to a third dimension, which the Bible usually assumes but does not discuss. It is the *shalom* sense of well-being experienced by *the person* who lives a caring, sharing, joyous life in community. By way of contrast, covetousness is presented as one aspect of the self-seeking life that is never satiated but always pursues selfish security only to discover that it leads to destruction:

“Because of the iniquity of his covetousness  
I was angry, I smote him,  
I hid my face and was angry...  
*Shalom, shalom*, to the far and to the near, says the  
Lord;  
and I will heal him.  
But the wicked are like the tossing sea;  
for it cannot rest,  
and its waters toss up mire and dirt.  
There is no *shalom*, says my God, for the wicked.”  
(Isaiah 57:17, 19–21, author's translation; compare  
Joshua 7)

And in Jesus' teaching, covetousness leads to a tormenting anxiety:

“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”...And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”...He said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear.” (Luke 12:13, 15, 22; compare Acts 5:1–14)



Thus, in creation, the forces of chaos are opposed by God's powerful will *for orderly fruitfulness*. In historic community, the forces of injustice and exploitation are opposed by God's will for *responsible, equitable justice*, which yields security. In personal existence, driven, anxious self-seeking is opposed by God's will for *generous caring*. The biblical vision of *shalom* functions always as a firm rejection of values and lifestyles that seek security and well-being in manipulative ways at the expense of another part of creation, another part of the community, or a brother or sister. The vision of the biblical way affirms that communal well-being comes by living God's dream, not by idolatrous self-aggrandizement. The alternative is to so distort creation as never to know what it means to celebrate the Sabbath. Either we strive to secure our own existence or we celebrate the joy and rest of Sabbath, knowing that God has already secured it for us. *Shalom* is received by grateful creation.

### Maintaining the Vision

The Bible is not romantic about its vision. It never assumes *shalom* will come naturally or automatically. Indeed, there are many ways of compromising God's will for *shalom*.

One way the community can say no to the vision and live without *shalom* is to deceive itself into thinking that its *private arrangements* of injustice and exploitation are suitable ways of living:

For from the least to the greatest of them,  
every one is greedy for unjust gain;  
and from prophet to priest,  
every one deals falsely.  
They have healed the wound of my people lightly,  
saying, "*Shalom, shalom,*" when there is no *shalom*.

(Jeremiah 6:13–14, author's translation; compare  
Ezekiel 13:10, 16 and Amos 6:1–6)

*Shalom* in a special way is the task and burden of the well-off and powerful. They are the ones held accountable for *shalom*. The prophets persistently criticized and polemicized against those well-off and powerful ones who legitimized their selfish prosperity and deceived themselves into thinking it was permanent. The prophetic vision of *shalom* stands against all private arrangements, all "separate peaces," all ghettos that pretend the others are not there (compare Luke 16:

19–31). Religious legitimacy in the service of self-deceiving well-being is a form of chaos. *Shalom* is never the private property of the few.<sup>4</sup>

A second way of perverting the vision is to take a *short-term view*. Isaiah preserves a story of King Hezekiah, who bargained the future of his people for present accommodation. He is condemned for thinking: “There will be peace (*shalom*) and security in my days” (Isaiah 39:8). A moment of well-being can be had today with enormous charges made against tomorrow. Parents pile up debts of hatred and abuse for their children to pay off. But the prophet is clear. *Shalom* is never short-range; eventually, someone must pay dearly. Caring for creation is never a one-generation deal (see Jeremiah 31:29–30; Ezekiel 18:2).

A third way of abusing God’s will for *shalom* is to *credit certain props* as sources of life—for example, to idolize political or religious furniture and pretend it is the power of God. Jeremiah saw that his people regarded the temple as a way of *shalom*, apparently thinking it was available and cheap without regard to demands that came with the package (Jeremiah 7:1–10). Similarly, Jesus exposed a self-deceiving mentality that valued particular moral rules at the expense of persons (Matthew 15:1–20). The vision of *shalom* is so great that it would be nice to manage and control it—to know the formula that puts it at our disposal—either by a religion of piety or morality or by a technology that puts it on call (see Deuteronomy 18:9–14). But *shalom* is not subject to our best knowledge or our cleverest gimmicks. It comes only through the costly way of caring.

### A Vital Hope

*Shalom* is an enduring vision. It is promised persistently and hoped for always. But there are those occasions when it is an especially vital hope. One such time was during Israel’s exile. Among the eloquent spokesmen for the vision in that period was Jeremiah. And among the most extraordinary texts is this letter he wrote to the exiles urging the validity of the vision even among displaced persons:

I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare (*shalom*) and not for harm, to

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<sup>4</sup>Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 16.

give you a future with hope...When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes.  
(Jeremiah 29:10–11, 13–14a)

On the face of it, the text is simply a promise that the exile will eventually end. But the structure moves from promise (verse 10) to land (place, verse 14). So again Israel is set on that joyous, tortuous path from promise to land, from wandering to security, from chaos to *shalom*. Thus, the experience of exile—like every experience—gets read as a part of the pilgrimage of this incredible vision of God with the people of Israel.

In a letter to the exiles in Babylon, Jeremiah uses our term twice. Jeremiah 29:11 has the affirmation that God wills *shalom* even for the exiles. God does not will evil, even though exile feels like evil. God wills a future and a hope—a promise thrusting to reality. We take the affirmation routinely. But its boldness can surprise when it is spoken in a time of despair and cynicism, when “the center cannot hold,” when everything has collapsed and everyone is weary, with hope exhausted. At the root of history is the One who wills *shalom*. At its end is the One who calls us to *shalom*, secure community, a golden calf that frequently seems to be against all the stubborn facts. A lesser resource will scarcely refute despair or enable alienated ones to care. Only being grasped by the Holy One will do this—the One who dares to promise and dream when the rest of us have given up.

And what does Jeremiah mean? Simply that God is there. We are not abandoned. (Note the affirmation in exilic texts, Isaiah 41:10, 14; 43:1–2, 5; 49:14–15; 54:7–10 and, in a quite different context, Matthew 28:20.) We are heard by God, who also answers (Exodus 3:7ff.; Isaiah 65:24). Ours is not an empty world of machinery where we get what we have coming to us. No! Caring, healing communication is still possible. There is this *Thou* who calls every historical *I* to community. Life is not a driven or an anxious monologue. The Lord is findable, which is a gospel theme of great importance when God seems dead or hidden (see Deuteronomy 4:29–31; Isaiah 55:6, both texts from the exile). The vision of *shalom* is most eloquently expressed in times very much like our own, when resources for faith to endure are hardly available. Thus, for example, in Isaiah 65:21, *shalom* motifs come together; in 65:25, reconciled creation; in 65:24, assured

dialogue.<sup>5</sup> It is natural that the question of *shalom* should vex the church precisely when life seems so much a monologue.

The other use of *shalom* in Jeremiah's letter to the exiles is in 29:7:

But seek the *shalom* of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its *shalom* you will find your *shalom*. (author's translation)

Imagine that! A letter written to displaced persons in hated Babylon, where they have gone against their will and watched their life and culture collapse. And they are still there, yearning to go home, despising their captors and resenting their God—if, indeed, God is still their God. And the speaker for the vision dares to say, “Your *shalom* will be found in Babylon's *shalom*.” The well-being of the chosen ones is tied to the well-being of that hated metropolis, which the chosen people fear and resent. It is profound and disturbing to discover that this remarkable religious vision will have to be actualized in the civil community. The stuff of well-being is the sordid collection of rulers, soldiers, wardens, and carpetbaggers in Judah and in every place of displaced, exhausted hope. It is an incredible vision even now for people of faith who feel pressed and angry about the urban shape of our existence, to say nothing about the urban shape of our vision. But again it is affirmed that God's *shalom* is known only by those in inclusive, caring community.

The letter of Jeremiah to the displaced persons surely did not meet expectations. No doubt they hoped for a purer gospel, a neater promise, a distinctive future. But God's exiles are always learning the hard way that the thrust toward viable unity must find a way to include the very ones we prefer to exclude. Depending on how deep the hatred and how great the fear, this promise of *shalom* with hated Babylon is a glorious promise or a sobering thought; but it is our best vision, a vision always rooted in and addressed to historical realities.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Embodiment of *Shalom***

The only *shalom* promised is one in the midst of historical reality, which comes close to saying “incarnation.” The only God we know

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<sup>5</sup>Cf. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 548–49.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, 37–41.

entered history, appeared as a person. *Shalom* of a biblical kind is always somewhat scandalous—never simply a liturgical experience or a mythical statement, but one facing our deepest divisions and countering with a vision.

The Pauline letters speak of this. There seem to be so many categories and divisions and discriminating marks that separate and pigeonhole, but there is also this:

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. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:28–29)

Called to the Lord's single community, bearers of God's single promise, children of the one Abraham. Paul runs blatantly over our favorite divisions—black-white, rich-poor, male-female, East-West, old-young, or whatever—finding them unreal and uninteresting. Those factors count not at all—our anxiety, drivenness, covetousness, injustice, chaos—none of these ever secures our existence. Yet we are secure, called to *shalom* from all our desperate efforts at security and our foolish manipulations to ensure dominance. Then Paul comes right out and says it ever more flatly: "He [Jesus] is our peace (*shalom*)" (Ephesians 2:14).

He got the lepers and the Pharisees all together again, the sons of Isaac and the heirs of Hagar, or so the vision lets us hope. He is known in the breaking of bread; he is crucified and risen; he is coming again—he who draws all people to himself, who rose from the dead and defied the governor, but who could not save himself. We say he embodies our vision and empowers us to live it.

We are sometimes children of the eighth day. And we risk an embracing of the vision. It is remarkable that lions and lambs share fodder, that widows and people of means have a common heritage, that our future is not in compulsive drivenness but in free caring. That vision surrounds us and addresses us, but we see only in a glass darkly.