

## The Ancient Conflict Between *Techne* and *Metis*

I return to a reading of I and II Kings that Ellul had undertaken in his book, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*.

### I.

I make that return to reading I and II Kings first by appeal to Robert Lifton who has spent his life studying totalitarian regimes, notably that of German National Socialism, Japanese militarism, and the effect of the nuclear race on the American psyche. In his recent memoir, Lifton utilized that term “totalism” to characterize absolutizing regimes that intend to monopolize technology, but also to monopolize imagination so that nothing significant is imaginable beyond the scope and administration of the governing regime.<sup>1</sup> I take such totalism to be an extreme embodiment of Ellul’s technology that is aimed at control, conformity, production, prediction, and ultimately monetization. Thus I judge that monetization is the inevitable outcome of such totalism, for I am unable to think of a totalism that has not ended in commoditization with its subjects being reduced to manageable and often dispensable commodities.

Second I appeal to the work of James C. Scott, a Yale anthropologist. In two books, *The Weapons of the Weak* and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Scott has reflected on how peasant societies can shrewdly resist the immense power of domination of the larger economy without an outcome of execution or imprisonment.<sup>2</sup> It is, however, a third book of Scott to which I call attention, namely, *Seeing like a State*. In this study Scott considers the ways in which states (he might also speak of large corporations) aim to regularize and order life in ways of uniformity and quantification in order to monopolize control and maximize production.<sup>3</sup> With such an urgency for conformity everything may be quantified without any capacity or allowance for local

differentiation. When the state establishes hegemony, the totalism may be administered in benign ways.

Scott's judgment about such quantifying uniformity is that life ordered in this way inescapably causes a deliberate dreadful loss of *metis*.<sup>4</sup> That is a word I did not know before reading Scott. The term refers to cunning intuition about how to engage with manage the irrepressible hiddenness of worldly reality that refuses ordered thinking.

Examples of *metis*, some of which are mentioned by Scott include:

- The gift whereby a seasoned physician can do a diagnosis, but cannot quite tell us the basis of such knowledge.
- The awareness of a seasoned farmer whom knows when it is time to plant potatoes or plow corn, knowledge that is not found in any agricultural manual.
- A good cook who uses no recipes, but fully knows what to add when, for how long in order to have good outcomes.
- A competent teacher who can wisely depart at the right moment from the "lesson plan" for the sake of educational imagination.
- The Christian Century (June 20, 2018 p. 9) reports that scientists were baffled by the disappearance of beluga whales until the Inuit elders in Alaska explained that it was because too many beavers had dammed the breeding grounds. The scientists called that "traditional ecological knowledge."

Such *metis* is transmitted informally from generation to generation, mostly orally, passed on by observation and practice, in intimate local contact.<sup>5</sup> "Seeing like state" is inimical to the valuing, practice, and transmission of *metis*. Indeed the state is likely to disregard and dismiss such artistry as folk magic or hokum in the interest of omniscience and uniformity. Thus I propose in

what follows that we consider *the technical capacity of "the state"* to quantify, produce, control, predict, maximize, and monetize as an exercise of totalism as the antithesis of *metis that is hosted in local community* in ways that generate abundance and that can foster health in human and natural environments. The conflict and contrast between *techne* and *metis* is my entry point for a reconsideration of the narrative of the books of Kings in the Hebrew Bible, narrative that Ellul has richly explicated in *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*.

## II.

In his book, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, Ellul has considered the prophetic narratives of Elijah and Elisha. He has fully appreciated and called attention to the way in which these narratives present these two remarkable characters as embodiments of the "Word of God" that comes as transformative force into the history of Israel and into the history of the world. Ellul is of course a faithful reader and sees exactly the claim of the text. It is also the case, however, that Ellul did this work in the wake of National Socialism and under the impact of Karl Barth and his compelling "theology of the word" that is also reflected in the defining Old Testament scholarship of Gerhard von Rad. As a result, Ellul's reading of these narratives is, as it were, "from above," from the perspective of the transcendent God who freely intrudes into the affairs of human persons and human society.

I want, in what follows, to see what happens in the narratives when we read "from below" in the context of *techne* and *metis*. In his exposition of the text Ellul paid almost no attention to the larger royal report as a context for these prophetic tales. The prophetic narratives of Elijah (I Kings 17-19, 21) and Elisha (I Kings 2-10) are situated in the longer narrative recital of I Kings 1-22 and II Kings 1-25 that provides a timeline and map of 400 years of royal governance. The prophetic narratives, I suggest, can only be understood if they are seen to be a

disruption of the royal totalizing tradition of Jerusalem (and to a lesser extent Samaria). Read “from above” they attest the lively Word of God. Read “from below,” they exhibit *metis* to which the kings had no access or held any appreciation.

Thus we must begin our exposition of the prophetic narratives with a consideration of the royal recital that contains the prophetic narratives. The substance of the royal recital is the domination of the political economy by the urban elites who clustered around the throne in Jerusalem. We must surely identify King Solomon as the founder of that totalism in ancient Israel that regulated political economic advantage that came to be exhibited by his enormous building program that centered in the temple with its opulent display of gold.<sup>6</sup> That same exhibit of advantage was expressed in a lesser way in the extravagance of the royal entourage that ate very well indeed, with a menu of endless meat:

Solomon’s provision for one day was thirty measures of choice flour, and sixty measures of meal, ten fat oxen and sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fatted fowl (I Kings 4:22-23).

There is no doubt that the temple and its royal liturgy functioned as legitimator for the regime; it gave a pious facade to raw usurpatious power, thus creating a hegemony that would need to host no question or critique. The regime enjoyed enormous wealth based on heavy taxation, slave labor, and international tribute money. Beyond that Solomon was an arms dealer who functioned as middle-man trading horses and chariots (I Kings 10:28-29).

The sum of taxation, forced labor, (low wages), and tribute money sustained a regime of surplus wealth that depended upon subsistence peasants. In this account it mattered not at all what the peasants thought or needed. It was enough to see what the state thought. And what the state thought was uniformity, production, prediction, quantification, and domination. In I Kings

11:14-40, moreover, it is reported that Solomon ruthlessly pursued his adversaries to contain or eliminate them, brooking no challenge to his monetized monopoly.

While this report is limited to Solomon we may assume, I suggest, that this long sequence of heirs to Solomon on the throne continued the practices of his National Security State and continued to preserve and value totalism. In the recital of I and II Kings, this way of imagining and governing is only twice decisively altered, once concerning King Hezekiah (II Kings 18-20), and once concerning King Josiah (II Kings 22-23). With these two exceptions, the substance of royal totalism in Jerusalem was consistently predatory.

This *substance* of royal recital, moreover, is matched by the *form* of the recital. Anyone who has read much in I and II Kings will notice that the royal report is formulaic in its boredom. Thus the report “sees like state.” It is spectacularly obvious that the kings, with few exceptions, have no narrative, because narrative is specific, detailed, and can be quixotic and subversive. Thus to “see like a state” is to refuse the particularity of specific persons and to deal in summaries and statistics in resistance to narrative.

I have elsewhere suggested, following John O’Banion, that we may make a distinction and contrast between *memo and poem*.<sup>7</sup> *Memos* are unambiguous declarations that serve as vehicles for state strategy that need take no notice of human particularity. *Poetry and narrative*, by contrast, constitute acts of imagination that refuse the limits of totalism and dare to voice and construe alternative reality. In both poem and narrative, the quotidian specificity of human life is affirmed and appreciated, the very quotidian specificity that totalism means to disregard. It is for that reason that managers of the totalism characteristically conflict with poets and story-tellers. In the Hebrew Bible the poets and story-tellers are called “prophets,” those who call attention to the lived human reality that kings cannot afford to notice. In our world they may be called

“journalists” or “artists.” When they contradict the totalism, they are readily dismissed as “fake.” The prophets, regularly dismissed by the forces of totalism, summoned Israel back to covenantal communitarian social reality. Thus I and II Kings articulates the defining either/or of human history, the “either” of neighbor or the “or” of techne that is predatory and has reduced the specificity of human data to formula and memo.

### III.

We may be astonished when we do the numbers in I and II Kings. These two prophetic figures, Elijah and Elisha, occupy fully one third of the “history” of 400 years of the royal recital. It is as though the entire recital of I and II Kings is formulated precisely so that Elijah and Elisha can be front and center in an attempt to present Israelite history “from below,” from an anti-totalizing perspective. Indeed, I suggest that the structure of the narrative is intended to delegitimize the kings and to present them as predatory irrelevances for covenantal history.

These prophetic narratives present these two characters as having abundant *metis*, the art and skill for the generation of life that is characteristically hosted in folk or peasant circumstance, an art and skill that is beyond precise articulation, but an art and skill that we know when we see it. Ellul’s reading “from above” seems to me more “supernatural” than the narrative requires, for these two figures, especially Elisha, are “of the people” and prefer the social reality of those below the radar of royal power among those who neither trust in nor benefit from the royal tradition.

We may then consider four of these prophetic narratives “from below” that dramatically occupy such a central crucial place in the royal recital. In **II Kings 4:1-7** Elisha is addressed by a desperate widow whose “creditor” threatens to seize her two children as slaves. The mention of a creditor evokes awareness of the predatory practices of the Jerusalem elite (or in the north the

elite of Samaria for which King Ahab is a point person) (see Amos 6:1-7). Elisha instructs the desperate widow to mobilize the neighborhood. The outcome of Elisha's work is that the widow paid her creditor and could "live on the rest." Elisha has turned a circumstance of dire need to one of neighborly abundance. The narrative explains nothing and has no curiosity about it. God is not directly implicated in the action. It is this wonder-working uncredentialed man who, I suggest, possesses *metis*. He knows what to do and how to do it, not unlike the folk I have seen effectively "witching water." The narrative is reticent, because such an act is beyond articulation.

In **II Kings 5:1-27** we have a narrative account of the dramatic healing of Naaman, a Syrian general, by Elisha. The general has leprosy; he is a ranking political general in the army of Israel's most dangerous enemy. The general, with his loud large entourage, is indignant at the mode of healing proposed by Elisha:

Go, wash in the Jordan seven times and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean (v. 10).

The general refuses the prescription until he is persuaded by his insistent advisors. And then he follows the prophetic instruction:

So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy and he was clean (v. 14).

The healing is accomplished by a folk act that is contrary to Syrian totalism. There is between the two a clash of world-views and modes of knowledge. Elisha follows an old remedy of Israel, so old that it surely antedated the Samarian royal regime. The clash between the two is continued in the on-going narrative, even though we most often stop reading at the healing. The general,

inured to the monetized healing system of his regime, wants to pay for his healing. He thinks in terms of insurance, co-pays, and deductions. But Elisha refuses:

As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing (v. 16)!

The general haggles some, but Elisha dismisses him and says, “Go in peace.” It is all free. It is all a gift of God mediated through peasant acts. Nothing is explained. Nothing can be managed. Nothing can be replicated.

In a third narrative, Syria is about to assault Elisha as a “leaker” of Syrian military intelligence (**I Kings 6:8-23**). But Elisha prays the Syrians blind:

Elisha prayed to the Lord, and said, “Strike this people, please, with blindness.”

So he struck them with blindness as Elisha had asked (v. 18).

Subsequently, when the Syrians had been captured and brought to Samaria, Elisha prayed them back to sight:

Elisha said, “O Lord, open the eyes of these men so that they may see.” The Lord opened their eyes, and they saw that they were inside Samaria (v. 20).

In the midst of this transaction the unnamed Israelite king, who has done nothing to protect his people, wants to kill the captured Syrians. Elisha, however, dismisses the Israelite king:

No! Did you capture with your sword and your bow those whom you want to kill (v. 22)?

Elisha asserts to the king that he, Elisha, is in charge. He is the one who has acted. The king had had no part in the capture of the Syrians. And then, as a concluding master stroke, Elisha commands a feast:

Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink; and let them go to their master v. 22).

Elisha, in contrast to the king, knows “the things that make for peace” (see Luke 19:42). The king knows the things that make for war, but has no clue about peace. Seeing like a state rarely results in peace. Elisha is presented as one gifted with skills to disrupt the violent posturing of the state, a skill before which his own king is helpless and impotent. Earlier in the narrative Elisha had reassured his frightened aide:

Don't be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them (v. 16).

Elishah's peculiar arithmetic turned out to be correct. This odd character, with seeming little effort, prevailed over both the king of Israel and the Syrian enemies of Israel. Elisha might have written these lines in the book of Proverbs:

No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel, can avail against the Lord.

The horse is made ready for the day of battle,

But the victory belongs to the Lord (Proverbs 21:30-31).

The proverb and the narrative both attest that there is an inscrutability in the public process that is not answerable to the reductionism of *techne*. It is no wonder that the narrative ends, against every royal assumption, in a cessation of hostility evoked by a feast of generosity:

And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel (v. 23).

After these episodes that concern in turn poverty (4:1-7), disease (5:1-22), and war (6:8-23), a further narrative concerns famine (**I Kings 6:24-7:20**). It is remarkable that these four narratives in turn take up the big problems of public policy, the very matters that must most concern kings and states. It is even more remarkable that the sum of these four narratives is a

sustained witness that this holy man, the bearer of *metis*, can manage and resolve these profound problems in a way that defies the usual explanations of established royal power.

In this fourth narrative concerning famine, two women are so desperate that they quarrel about whether the son of one of them will be eaten by the other woman. The narrative is framed with the insight accepted by later economists: famines are not about an absence of food, but concern scarcity that drives the price of food up so that it is unavailable to the poor:

As the siege [of the Syrians against the capitol city of Samaria] continued, famine in Samaria became so great that a donkey's head was sold for eighty shekels of silver and one-fourth of a cab of dove's dung for five shekels of silver (6:25).

That is much too much to pay for a donkey head or measure dove dung!

When Elisha enters the narrative he declares that the current unbearable price of food will soon end:

Tomorrow about this time a measure of choice meal shall be sold for a shekel, and two measures of barley for a shekel at the gate of Samaria (7:1).

The prophet does not explain. His anticipation runs beyond royal management or imagination; not surprisingly, the royal officer resists the prophetic anticipation:

Then the captain on whose hand the king leans said to the man of God: "Even if the Lord were to make windows in the sky, could such a thing happen?" (7:2).

But Elisha insists. He does not explain, but he adds a twist of threat against the royal officer:

You shall see it with your own eyes, but you shall not eat from it (7:2).

The stage is thus set for the life-or-death contest between royal *techne* that cannot produce food and the alternative of this peculiar man. Indeed, this unnamed king confesses his inability to manage the famine. He answers the two quarreling women:

No! Let the Lord help you. How can I help you? From the threshing floor or the wine press? (6:27).

The resolution of this conflict comes in a way not anticipated. The army camp of the dread Syrians was deserted. The army had run off in fear and left rich food supplies behind. And the reason for the abrupt departure of the frightened army?

For the Lord had caused the Aramean army to hear the sound of chariots, and of horses, the sound of a great army, so that they said to one another, “The king of Israel has hired the kings of the Hittites and the king of Egypt to fight against us (7:7).

The narrative is elusive. The Syrians in their fearfulness had heard sounds like those of chariots, horses, and a mighty army. They fled because it seemed too ominous. The report does not say that there were horses, chariots, or army, but only the sound of them. The report says further, “The Lord had caused...” Who knew? The cause was beyond the calculation of *Realpolitik* among those responsible for military planning. Maybe it was a great wind, but who knows about the wind?

The rest of the narrative follows from the sound that caused Syrian panic. Four lepers who were excluded from society and banished to garbage heaps “beyond the city gate” came upon the abandoned food of the Syrian army:

When the leprous men had come to the edge of the camp, they went into a tent, ate and drank, carried off silver, gold, and clothing, and went and hid them. Then

they came back, entered another tent, carried off things from it, and went and hid them... So they went after them as far as the Jordan; the whole way was littered with garments and equipment that the Arameans had thrown away in their haste (7:8, 15).

The lepers (who had never relied upon royal beneficence) were astonished at their good find.

They felt an obligation to report their find to the king and this is how they understood their find:

They said to one another, "What we are doing is wrong. This is a day of good news; if we are silent and wait until morning light, we will be found guilty; therefore let us go and tell the king's household (7:9).

The lepers spoke of their "good news." The term they use is the common word for "message"; but the term also came to mean "good news, gospel." The matter is left open. "This is a day of good news...or this is a day for gospel news... or this is a day of news." This is a day of welcome surprise that is beyond royal planning or explanation.

Sure enough; the narrative concludes:

Then the people went out, and plundered the camp of the Arameans. So a measure of choice meal was sold for a shekel and two measures of barley for a shekel, according to the word of the Lord (7:16).

The narrator remembers and reports in reiteration the prophetic response to the cynicism of the royal captain:

For when the man of God had said to the king, "Two measures of barley shall be sold for a shekel, and a measure of choice meal for a shekel, about this time tomorrow in the gate of Samaria," the captain had answered the man of "God, "Even if the Lord were to make windows in the sky, could such a thing happen?"

And he answered, “You shall see it with your own eyes, but you shall not eat from it.” It did indeed happen to him; the people trampled him to death in the gate (vv. 18-20).

The narrative artfully reiterates the previous interaction to underscore the prophetic defeat of royal cynicism. The royal officer is trampled to death by the hungry crowd that surged for food. The hungry crowd, by contrast, ate because food had abruptly become cheap and abundant. The narrative details an abrupt inscrutable historical reversal that is anticipated by Elisha and performed, so it is said, by the Lord who caused the sound. Nothing is explained; but when we hear the outcome, we may be amazed.

Critical scholarship has regularly taken the royal chronicle as normative.<sup>8</sup> You can find that royal time-line in all the history books and in all church basements where people study ancient Israel. Here however the royal time-line is dramatically interrupted for a very long pause in the midst of the Omri dynasty of Northern Israel. “Chronicle” is disrupted by “narrative.” *Uniformity* is exposed by *amazement and wonder*. Critical study has diminished and disregarded the narrative for the sake of the chronicle, and has preferred explanation to amazement. It is not so only for the Bible, but elsewhere as well. In doing US history, we regularly focus on the sequence of presidents and their wars. In doing biblical history we rely on the royal sequence. From that insistent perspective it is possible that we would never guess that the real US history-makers include Frederick Douglas, Susan Anthony, Eugene Debs, Walter Reuther, Michael Harrington, Martin Luther King, Julian Bond, Ida Tarbell, Howard Zinn, Daniel Berrigan, Jim Wallis and dozens of others who have had no capacity for *techne*, but who have embodied the available force of holiness that is operative in, with, and under royal time-lines.<sup>9</sup>

#### IV.

Beyond these positive attestations that lie outside the totalism of royal recital, we may notice that the narratives in careful and understated ways are able to exhibit the impotence and ultimate irrelevance of those who occupy the royal time-line.<sup>10</sup> For starters we notice that the kings, in these narratives, always remain unnamed, because once we have seen one king, we know about them all.

-In **II Kings 4:1-7** concerning the desperate widow, the king is not even mentioned. We get only a mention of a creditor and the payment of debt. That reference to a creditor is enough to indicate the looming presence of the predatory economy for which the king is the point person. Then as now, the imposition and management of debt is not an incidental phenomenon, but, as David Graeber has shown, it is a systemic arrangement designed to guarantee a dependent class that must settle for menial work and low wages.<sup>11</sup> Elisha not only provides food for the widow. He emancipates the helpless widow from the predatory economy for a new life of well-being. Such an emancipation, in the purview of Israel's faith, is an exodus *in nuce*, because the Exodus writ large concerns the same emancipation from a predatory economy. Credit and debt, in the world of a neighborly peasant economy, is not a defining social reality.

-In **5:1-27** the leprous Syrian general, Naaman, appeals to the unnamed Israelite king for healing. That unnamed king must, perforce, refuse the chance to heal:

Am I a God, to give death or life (5:7)?

The king is not God! The king does not have healing power. The king lives within a tiny world of circumscribed capacity. That limit is not unlike the limit of Pharaoh's intelligence community that could not produce gnats! (Exodus 8:18).

-In the war story of **6:8-23** Elisha, by his two-fold prayer on blindness and seeing, ended the hostility and brought peace. The Syrian king is rendered helpless by blindness and becomes a

docile recipient of Elisha's work, reduced to a prisoner whom Elisha sent home in peace. The appearance of the unnamed Israelite king shows him to be irrelevant. The Israelite king wants to kill the Syrians, imagining that he is in charge. But Elisha must remind the king that he has no claim on the prisoners:

No! Did you capture with your sword and your bow those whom you want to kill?  
(6:22).

The king did not capture them and therefore cannot kill them. It is Elisha, not the king, who must settle the matter.

-In the narrative of famine in **II Kings 6:24-7:20**, as we have seen, the king recognizes his own limitation:

No! Let the Lord help you. How can I help you? From the threshing floor or from the wine press? (6:27).

In sum:

-In *the poverty narrative*, the drama of royal credit and debt is superseded (I Kings 4:7);

-In *the disease narrative*, the king is not a God and is unable to heal (5:7).

-In *the war narrative*, the king is a bystander who cannot make peace and has no right to the prisoners (6:22).

-In *the famine narrative*, the king cannot provide food (6:27).

In *poverty*, in *disease*, in *war*, and in *famine*, the kings are, before our very eyes and in our very ears, declared to be an irrelevance. The managers of *techne* have been reduced in stature as we readers are invited to recognize and savor that human agents of a very different ilk are the ones who know the arts by which to deal concretely with the realities of poverty, disease, war, and famine. When we line out these narratives that mock the royal timeline that precedes and follows

these narratives, we are more knowing readers. We are required to recognize that the outcomes of human possibility are in the hands of uncredentialed human agents who know and act otherwise. Ellul echoes this strange awareness:

I try to do here the same thing I do in all my books: face, alone this world I live in, try to understand it, and confront it with another reality I live in, but which is utterly unverifiable (ix).<sup>12</sup>

The totalism is not nearly as total as it may imagine. “Seeing like a state” in the end is outflanked by uncompromising mystery that makes a way out of no way.

## V.

I may add a coda concerning the Christian New Testament. Thomas Brodie and David Moessner have seen how the Jesus narrative, most particularly in Luke (and then in the Book of Acts) reiterates the Elijah-Elisha narrative.<sup>13</sup> Jesus, in his turn, is featured as a carrier of *metis* that contradicts the *techne* of the Roman Empire and those of the Jews who colluded with Rome.

The explicit connection of Jesus to the old narratives is the fact that in his initial appearance at Nazareth, in the rendering of Luke, Jesus first quotes the Jubilee reference from Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Luke 4:18-19).

Jesus cites the most subversive act of imagination offered in ancient Israel by alluding to the Jubilee Year. It is a reference that deeply contradicts royal totalism. Then, in response to hostility, he says:

But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian (vv.25-27).

Jesus cites one narrative from Elijah and one from Elisha as justification for his own intention. Before this encounter at Nazareth, moreover, Luke at the outset has Mary articulate the theme for his longer narrative concerning the inversion of all social power:

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
He has filled the hungry with good things,  
And sent the rich away empty (Luke 1:52-53).

And in Luke 3:1-2 Luke situates the narrative of Jesus amid the authorities:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis and Lasanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Ananias and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

That “wilderness” is not unlike the venue where Elijah first encountered the word (I Kings 17:1-7).

It turns out that Luke’s narrative concerning Jesus is “a history of amazement” in response to this one who accommodated none of the royal arrangements. After his embrace of inexplicable *metis*, we get this:

When his parents saw him, they were *astonished* (Luke 2:48).

They were all *amazed* and kept saying to one another, “What kind of utterance is this? (Luke 4:36).

*Amazement* seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, “We have seen strange things today (Luke 5:26).

All were *astonished* at the greatness of God (Luke 9:42).

The actions and words of Jesus defied explanation by the authorities who were inured to their technical limitations. Luke, moreover, continued that accent in the Book of Acts concerning the performance of the apostles:

*Amazed and astonished*, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? (Acts 2:7).

Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested by you by God with deeds of power, *wonders*, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know (Acts 2:22).

They were filled with *wonder and amazement* at what had happened to him (Acts 3:10).

All who heard him [Ananias] were *amazed* (Acts 9:21).

And of course in Luke's reading the Easter appearance of Jesus constituted the ultimate defeat of imperial *techne*.

I have come to think and believe that this matter of amazement concerning *metis* carried by human agents (that is rooted in Israelite tradition, celebrated in Christian tradition, and shared in various forms in other religious traditions) is the clue to human survival, because the managers of *techne* (and we in their wake) have largely surrendered to an ideology of death. The urgent question left from such a conclusion is whether there can be a new emancipatory ecumenism through which these several religious traditions can pool their capacity, or whether in sectarian defensiveness each tradition will attach its claim to a particular expression of *techne*. Amazement cannot be slotted on an organizational chart, packaged in an orthodoxy, or assigned to tribal myopia. It can, however, be distorted and robbed of transformative power when it is regarded as property, possession, or totem. It then loses its emancipatory capacity and leaves

- widows in the hands of creditors;
- lepers in the grip of disease,
- prisoners of war in the power of vengeful kings; and
- hungry women at risk amid high priced food.

All of this is common, ordinary, and normal. This tradition of *metis*, however, insists that it need not be so!

Walter Brueggemann

Columbia Theological Seminary

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## Notes

1. Robert Jay Lifton, *Witness to an Extreme Century; A Memoir* (New York: Free Press, 2011)

381; see 67-68, list the “eight deadly sins” of totalism:

1. Milieu control.
2. Mystical manipulation.
3. The demand for purity.
4. The cult of confession.
5. The sacred science.
6. Loading the language.
7. Doctrine over person.
8. Dispensing of existence.

2. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

3. James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). Davis Hankins and Brennan Breed (oral communication) have recently found exactly such thinking in the Ptolemaic regime of Egypt in the second century BCE. The government counted every fruit tree in its domain and estimated the expected fruit crop from each tree.

Two instances of such thinking occur to me from my own experience. On the faculty of Eden Seminary were thirteen of us, all of whom lived in seminary housing. Once the administration generously decided we would all get new garage doors, and we did. We did, even

if we had old garages not used, or new garages with new doors. We all got new garage doors, even though it was an intimate informal community. Or second, in the early days of the United Church of Christ, administration was propelled from a major church board in New York City. In St. Louis where I lived we had a modest church publishing house, nearly a mom and pop enterprise that now fell to the national administration. Into that modest operation came all kinds of administrative directives from New York City, most of which were unnecessary and unwanted by the local managers, which rankled but did not increase productivity. “Seeing like a state” justified uniformity of administration with an inability and lack of interest in dealing with actual social reality. The publishing peasants in St. Louis were as affronted as any Galilean or Soviet peasant could be.

4. Scott, *Seeing like a State* 177-178, nn. 317-318, 332, 335. Scott reports that he appropriated the notion of *metis* from the work of Aleksandra Kollontay, Rosa Luxemburg, and Jane Jacobs.

Usually translated, inadequately as “cunning,” *metis* is better understood as the kind of knowledge that can be acquired only by long practice at similar but rarely identical tasks, which require constant adaptation to changing circumstance...*Metis*, far from being rigid and monolithic, is plastic, local, and divergent. It is in fact the idiosyncrasies of *metis*, its contextualness, and its fragmentation that make it so permeable, so open to new ideas. *Metis* has no doctrine or centralized training; each practitioner has his or her own angle...The practice and experience reflected in *metis* is almost always *local*...We might reasonably think of situated, local knowledge as being *partisan* knowledge as opposed to generic knowledge...It would be a serious error to believe that the destruction of *metis* was merely the inadvertent and necessary by-product of

economic progress. The destruction of *metis* and its replacement by standardized formulas legible only from the center is virtually inscribed in the activities of both the state and large-scale bureaucratic capitalism (177-78, 332, 317-318, 335).

5. Such transmission is most readily accomplished by one-on one mentoring. See the forthcoming study of mentoring from Eerdmans Press edited by Cam Murchison and Dean Thompson.

6. See Walter Brueggemann, *Solomon: Israel's Ironic Icon of Human Achievement* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005) chapters 5 and 7.

7. Walter Brueggemann, "Poems vs. Memos," *Ice Axes for Frozen Seas; A Biblical Theology of Provocation* (ed. by Davis Hankins; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014) 87-113. See John D. O'Banion, *Reorienting Rhetoric: The Dialectic of List and Story* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

8. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) 80-85, and *passim*, considers the hubris of Western epistemology in imagining its knowledge to be objective and universal, without being situated in any particular locale:

Every way of knowing and sensing (feeling) that do [sic] not conform to the epistemology and aesthesis of the zero point are cast behind in time and/or in the order of myth, legend, folklore, local knowledge and the like. Since the zero point is always in the present of time and the center of space, it hides its own local knowledge universally projected. Its imperialism consists precisely in hiding its locality, its geo-historical body location, and in assuming to be universal and thus managing the universality to which everyone has to submit...Scientific thought

positions itself as the only valid form of producing knowledge, and Europe acquires an *epistemological hegemony* over all other cultures of the world (80-81).

This accurately describes the dominant critical attitude toward the Elijah-Elisha narratives in the presence of the royal recital. It is this absence of any particular place that is the deception of the “creative class” in the US. To the contrary, Wendell Berry is among us the great champion of place.

I recall the oral report of Robert Coles, a Harvard psychiatrist, when he observed the courageous Black children who integrated the Little Rock school. When Coles interviewed Ruby (one of those children) and her mother, he was astonished that Ruby’s mother instructed her that she must forgive the rabid racists who harassed her as she entered the school. Coles reported that he and his wife were astonished by this response because it fit none of their preconceptions about the transaction. Coles said that he had no explanation; the only thing he and his wife could do was to go and “have a drink.” The capacity of Ruby and her mother to forgive was grounded in a religious understanding that eluded the categories of social science.

9. See Walter Brueggemann, *Hope within History* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987) 49-71, concerning history-makers.

10. On the following, see Walter Brueggemann and Davis Hankins, “The Affirmation of Prophetic Power and Deconstruction of Royal Authority in the Elisha Narratives,” *CBQ* 76/1 (January, 2014) 58-76.

11. David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York: Melvillehouse, 2011).

12. Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 1.

13. Thomas L. Brodie, *The Crucial Bridge: The Elijah-Elisha Narrative as an Interpretive Synthesis of Genesis–Kings and a Literary Model for the Gospels* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), David P. Moessner, *Lord of the Banquet: The Literary and Theological Significance of the Lukan Travel Narrative* (Harrisburg: Trinity International Press, 1989).