

## Norman Gottwald

Norman Gottwald has died at 95. He is, in my judgment, the most important and influential Old Testament scholar of the twentieth century in the U.S. (The only other near candidate for that, in my judgment, is Brevard Childs who died in 2007.) In 1979 Gottwald published his discipline-redefining opus, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.* (See my early review of Gottwald's book in *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 48 (1980), 441-51. Perhaps there is some irony in the fact that Childs also published his discipline-redefining work, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* in the same year. Thus 1979 was a major pivot point in the discipline, as these two lead scholars moved, in very different ways, beyond conventional historical social criticism that had dominated study in the modern era. It was characteristic of Gottwald's generous, irenic way that he published an article showing how his work and the work of Childs could be constructively held together in a useful, critical way, "Social Matrix and Canonical Shape" (*Theology Today*, 1985).

Gottwald's book is of durable significance because, in a quite frontal way, he set out to read the Old Testament with reference to the interpretive categories of the social sciences, notably the function of economics. Specifically, he focused on the period of the Book of Judges and the "tribal" configuration in Israel before the emergence of the monarchy. He reviewed and rejected the notion that there was a violent "conquest" of the land by the invasive, intrusive Israelites from Egypt. In like manner, he reviewed and rejected the German hypothesis that the land was settled by "immigrants." Positively, he championed the thesis that the conflict narrated in the Book of Judges was the result of a "Peasant Revolt" whereby the subsistence agricultural peasants in Canaan violently revolted against the Canaanite city-kings and aggressive landowners who acted in predatory, exploitative ways toward the vulnerable peasants. That is, he proposed that the narrative reflects something of a class conflict.

In order to fund the imagination, courage, and energy of such a peasant movement, Gottwald proposed that the Pentateuchal traditions may be understood, in sum and substance, as the "ideology" that was celebrated and reiterated in cultic context. This regular public reiteration of the narratives provided coherence and justification for "the revolt." It was inescapable that along with such a hypothesis of a

cultic recital of a justifying “ideology” would come the question of the role of YHWH, the God featured in the “ideological” narratives of the Pentateuch. Gottwald proceeded very carefully to distinguish his approach that he termed “Structural Functionalism” from the usual “religious idealism” that keeps YHWH as an independent agent quite distinct from social reality. Gottwald concludes that “mono-Yahwism” is a “function” of “sociopolitical equality.”

The loosely federated egalitarian tribalism of Israel was symbolized and institutionalized at the most comprehensive level by a common cultic-ideological allegiance to mono-Yahwism...Accordingly, my functional proposition that mono-Yahwism was dependably related to communal egalitarianism leads us to see that mono-Yahwism, far from being an eccentric, cultic compartment of Israel’s life or an arbitrary ornament on the main body of society, was in fact of critical significance as the axial, form-giving, and energy-releasing reality in literary and intellectual culture, in economics, in social organization, in military affairs, and in self-government (615-616).

It follows immediately for Gottwald that the reverse proposition is also the case: “Sociopolitical egalitarianism was a function of mono-Yahwism” (p. 616). In these reciprocal formulations YHWH and social egalitarianism are intimately and exclusively held together. Thus belief in YHWH is accepted

...as the motivator and sanctioner of the social system, together with his cult’s minimal demands on the resources and on political power, met the two potentially contradictory communal needs for cultural identity and unified self-defense against rival systems, on the one hand, and for egalitarianism and self-rule, on the other hand (619-620).

Thus in the confessional life of early Israel YHWH is inescapably and integrally linked to a certain view of and certain practice of economic egalitarianism. It is impossible to overstate the importance of this daring claim by Gottwald that is at the heart of his study. This two-way articulation of “function” means that Israel cannot “have” YHWH without the social vision and social practice of neighborly covenantalism. Conversely, this means that in context Israel could not have such a social practice and vision except as it was linked to YHWH. It may be readily inferred from Gottwald that the counterpoint is also true. Canaan could not have its predatory city-king economic system without Ba’al, and Ba’al could not be embraced without the embrace of a predatory economy, for Ba’al is (in the horizon of Israel) the great lord and legitimator of economic predation. This linkage is evident if we consider, at the same time, *the dramatic “contest” at Mt. Carmel between YHWH and Ba’al (I Kings 18)*, a contest of gods, and *the narrative of Naboth’s vineyard, a dispute about land (I Kings 21)*. Ahab and Jezebel, as followers of and

advocates for Ba'al, felt legitimate in seizing peasant land, even as Elijah, an advocate for YHWH, speaks a harsh word on behalf of the peasant interest of Naboth. This linkage is defining for Gottwald and is a central teaching that we may learn to take seriously as we observe the same linkage everywhere in both the Old and New Testaments. A key distortion of biblical faith, in Gottwald's frame of reference, is the widespread, endlessly recurring attempt to have the God of the Bible without the socioeconomic practice that goes with that God. When that linkage is not deliberately maintained, both the God of Israel (the God of the Gospel!) and the social economic practice of the community are sure to be distorted.

It is illuminating to take into account the immediate cultural context in which Gottwald did his remarkable work. In larger context, he worked in the midst of an emerging "liberation theology" that was much informed by Marxian categories of analysis. Much more specifically Gottwald lived and worked in the Bay area as a faculty member of the Graduate Theological Union amid the wake of the Vietnam War and at the time of the "free speech movement" in the university that pitted protesting students against the quite unresponsive administration of the university that was backed and supported in its intransigence by the ideological fervor of Governor Reagan and his Board of Regents. It is easy enough to see that the conflict (conflict between the gods and conflict between social systems) that Gottwald discerned in the biblical tradition was being reperformed before his very eyes! Lest we judge that Gottwald's hypothesis of a "peasant revolt" was for him too personal and subjective, we may notice that it has been observed that the German hypothesis of "immigration" nicely echoes the Bismarkian formation of the German state, just as the American model of "conquest" reflects the European colonialization of the American continent. No interpretation is ever innocent about such matters, and Gottwald surely was not.

As is invariably the case with such daring hypothesis, Gottwald's book has required many refinements over time, the correction of some overstatements, and the elimination of some materials that turned out to be elementally distractive. On the main point, however, Gottwald's scholarship has decisively changed the discipline by his erudite insistence that the "*faith*" of Israel in YHWH cannot and must not be separated from *the socioeconomic political realities* that the ancient community of Israel faced. Thus the covenantal vision of a neighborly economy, so clearly and often voiced in the Torah, is an

advocacy for and an insistence upon both polity and practice that are pro-neighbor and anti-predation and accumulation.

It is my judgment that no leader of a Jewish or Christian community of faith can afford to disregard the gains accomplished by Gottwald in his interpretive work. Of course the Christian movement has been many centuries in becoming domesticated by the force of empire, so that much of the church and its testimony are simply an echo and reiteration of dominant socioeconomic practice. As the church has readily settled for such domestication, it has lost much of its courage and its nerve, and its capacity to speak directly about the God who funds and inhabits the biblical and church traditions. The outcome is a church that is systemically anemic in its claim. As a result the church has become a major champion and practitioner of “charity” that is content to remain safely inside the assumptions of confiscatory economics. Such an anemic practice provides neither energy nor courage for engagement in a neighborly economy that (a) requires *a radical sustained critique of our systemic economic arrangements* and (b) that *requires emancipated imagination about an alternative practice*. It is not necessary, in my judgment, that church leaders should be able to articulate the specificities of current economic reality and alternative prospects. It is enough if the church can fund and evoke imagination that gives a place to stand outside the current dominant system. That in turn requires, simply, that we learn to read the Bible differently, which is exactly what Gottwald sought to teach us. “Differently” is to see the linkage between *the character and resolve of God* and the *mandate of “sociopolitical equality”* as a function of Yahwism that is on offer everywhere in scripture. Once one inhales the main gains of Gottwald’s scholarship, one begins to see everywhere in scripture a critique of dominant systems and the imaginings of a different “more excellent way.”

No one doubts that Gottwald was a significant scholar. What is not to be missed amid his great learning, however, is that his tenacious life-long work is permeated with great moral passion. It is the passion he extended to the protesting students in Berkeley, but also to many other situations of injustice as well. He was a formidable voice in advocacy for feminism, and for native rights in the United States.

This combination of erudition and social passion mark him as a presence among us of singular importance.

My purpose in writing this is to encourage pastors and church leaders who have lingered too long in old-fashioned historical criticism that they may have learned in seminary to do the work of study in the new directions of reading scripture with reference to economic matters. On the one hand, such work belongs properly to the faithful church. That the gospel pertains to economic matters is evident in many Torah provisions to which the prophets often made appeal. And clearly Jesus was eventually executed by the state because he voiced a dangerous critique of and alternative to the dominant system of his day. Thus the recovery of faithful interpretation of the Bible is urgent among us.

On the other hand, as our society grows more frightened and more repressive, there is almost no room in our society for the voicing of restorative justice, the kind initiated by the Lord of the Exodus. The church, in its faithful reading and faithful preaching, is one such urgent venue for truth-telling that is now so needed among us. That truth-telling concerns the *expose of our predatory economic system* that produces and sustains poverty via cheap labor; it also concerns *the articulation of an alternative* of “the way, the truth, and the life” that will yield neighborly abundance. As long as the church (and its pastors) is in unthinking collusion with dominant economic assumptions, this hard and transformative truth is not likely to be spoken aloud.

And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (Romans 10:14-15).

Gottwald understood that this is a time for “beautiful feet.” His breathtaking book and his long refinement of it attest to a life that continues to matter to the rest of us—a good and faithful servant of the revolution and the God of the revolution!

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