

**From Shock and Awe to Shock and Grace:
a Response to Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*¹**

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**Presentation for "Empire Remixed," University of Toronto, November 26, 2007
and "Theology in the Pub," University of Western Ontario, November 28, 2007.**

Shock and Awe

In 1996 the US military released a document entitled *Shock and Awe: Achieving Military Dominance*. In that document the authors articulate a military policy in which an invading force should "seize control of the environment and paralyze or so overload an adversary's perceptions and understanding of events so that the enemy would be incapable of resistance."²

It is not enough to simply seize control through swift and efficient military strikes. An enemy can regroup and begin to launch counter measures even under these circumstances. No, you must seize control of more than just the battlefield, the transportation and communication lines and the energy resources – you must also "overload an adversary's perceptions and understanding of events" because only by doing so will you render the enemy incapable of resistance.

Overload perceptions and understandings. It is not enough to take captive territory, you must also take captive the imaginations of the vanquished people.

This is an old strategy and has been the common practice of all imperial forces throughout history. "Resistance is futile" not just because of the empire's superior military strength, but more importantly because of the empire's control of perception. Why resist an empire that has the blessings of the gods? Why resist an empire that has the very force of history behind it? Why resist an empire that brings nothing but blessing, security and economic growth? Why resist an empire that has the sheer force of nature, indeed the very laws of nature, on its side? It would be as futile as resisting the law of gravity.

But people will resist such imperial force. People will stubbornly hang on to their old ways, their old perceptions of reality, their old worldviews. So the empire must use shock therapy. So shock and awe the opponent that the change in their reality is so quick, so radical and so thorough that old ways of thinking, old

¹ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2007).

² Cited by Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, p. 176.

perceptions simply can't account for the new reality. Create such a deep experience of disorientation that the old ways, the old perceptions, the old worldview, the previous orientation simply cannot cope and the people, the nation, are left paralyzed in the face of it all.

This, says Naomi Klein, has been the strategy of Friedmanite economics since its first experiment in the coup in Chile on September 11, 1973. Milton Friedman, the father of what has become known in the US and the UK as neoconservative economics, but is aptly named neo-liberalism everywhere else; the granddaddy of what is also known as the "Chicago School" or the "Chicago Boys" once said that "only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable."³

But what were the existing policies that needed to be overthrown? Generally speaking these would be policies of a mixed economy in which the state is active in controlling, stimulating, directing and regulating the economic life of the nation. Policies like taxation to pay for education, health care and social welfare protection. Policies like allowing the state to own and operate certain sectors of the economy – from transportation to oil production to communications, health care, education, prisons, policing, etc.

But these are all, in the perspective of the radical laissez faire economics of the Chicago School 'unnatural' interventions in the free and natural functioning of the market. And so it is part and parcel of the Chicago ideology – an ideology that has dominated the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the US Treasury and Foreign policy since at least the Reagan years – that economic reform must include cuts in taxation for the richest people in a society, the liberalization of trade laws to allow for so-called 'free trade' between nations (especially free access to resources and markets in the impoverished south for the wealthy north), the privatization of most government functions (including health care, education, communications and transportation), the privatization of all nationalized business operations (especially in the energy sector) and, interestingly, an increase in tax-based military expenditures.

Now remember that Friedman said we need a crisis, or a shock, to occur before such policies could be implemented. Why? Because only in such a crisis will the "politically impossible become the politically inevitable."

³ Cited by Klein, *Ibid.*, p. 166.

But why would these policies be politically impossible? Isn't this vision of life all about freedom? Hasn't the mantra always been that political and economic freedom go hand in hand? Hasn't the mantra always been that democracy and free market capitalism always come together? And if this is true, wouldn't it suggest that not only is such an economic system economically inevitable (it is, after all, simply the natural way to organize an economy), and politically inevitable, but that it would also be politically desirable and therefore eminently possible?

Well the answer is, no. We didn't need Naomi Klein to tell us that wherever this kind of economic ideology has raised its head, wherever it has come to political dominance it has been accompanied by dictatorship, violence, and the repression of political, social and even religious freedom and rights.

Just think of the places:⁴

Chile
Uruguay
Argentina
Guatemala
Brazil
Indonesia
China
Russia
South Africa
Poland
Iraq
Sri Lanka
UK
USA

Just think of some of the names:

The Shah of Iran
General Pinochet
General Suharto
Colonel Castillo
Rios Mont

⁴ I am indebted to Ericka Stephens-Rennie for these lists. "Plots, Pressures and Penetrations: Neo-Conservative Economics and the Injustice of Rape." A presentation at Empire Remixed, University of Toronto, November 26, 2007.

<http://www.empireremixed.com/>

Boris Yeltsin
 Deng Xiaoping
 Margaret Thatcher
 George Bush
 Paul Bremner

The politically impossible must become the politically inevitable.

But why is it politically impossible? This kind of economic revolution is politically impossible for one very good reason: there are more poor people than there are rich people. This is an economics that cannot be democratically maintained because poor people are hurt in it and the rich benefit.

Who benefits from taxing the rich? Who benefits from free public education? Who benefits from state sponsored health care? Who benefits from public control over public resources? Who benefits from trade laws that will privilege local producers and protect the local market from being flooded with goods produced elsewhere? Who benefits from investment laws that limit foreign investment and control?

Who benefits? Those who cannot afford to pay for education and health care benefit. Those who somehow believe that the resources of their nation should serve the needs of their community benefit. Those who need protection because they don't have the economic or political power to protect themselves benefit.

No wonder these radically laissez-faire economic reforms are politically impossible. No wonder you need shock therapy to so disorient the society that you can then institute these reforms with rapid speed without democratic consent. The majority of people would never accept such changes. Eliminating the public sphere, providing free reign to corporate power, and reducing social spending to a skeletal level are not the kinds of things that most people would vote for.

And no wonder, these changes come with an increase in military spending. You need a strong and repressive military force to pull off this kind of stuff.

The Shock Doctrine

Naomi Klein's book is deeply disturbing. Her thesis is as simple as it is devastating. Shock takes three stages: first put the entire population in a state of collective shock through some kind of crisis (whether it be a coup, a terrorist attack, market meltdown, war or a natural disaster, doesn't really matter); then, in that brief moment of societal confusion and disorientation move quickly to

radically reform the economy and other social and political structures in a way that will institute Chicago school economic policies; and then, if there is opposition, if people arise out of their confused state and begin to protest what has gone on, begin to militate against the new regime ... well then the third level of shock is necessary and out come the electric shock cables, out come the implements of torture, people start getting 'disappeared', mass graves need to be dug, the society must be cleansed of the filth, the garbage, the pollutants that will stand in the way of what is politically and economically inevitable. What once was thought of as democratically impossible must now engage in such repression that there will be no imagination left, no perception left, no reorientation possible that would allow for dreaming of new possibilities beyond the repression.

Now here's the thing. Klein argues that this pattern has been seen over and over again over the last thirty five years - from the Southern Cone to the former Soviet Union, to South Africa, to China, to post-tsunami South East Asia, to post-Falklands Thatcher's UK, to post 9/11 America and the rise of the national security industry.

And sometimes, while reading the book, I would turn the page and say to myself, "not again! Surely this pattern didn't repeat itself in post-Solidarity Poland, surely not in post-apartheid South Africa! Surely that isn't what happened in post-Katrina New Orleans!" But Klein's argument is compelling and her evidence is exhaustive and at times emotionally and intellectually exhausting.

The matters before us in *The Shock Doctrine* are not of mere intellectual curiosity. They are matters of life and death. They are matters of ideological power wielded over the lives of billions of people, nations, economies, indeed the planet itself. As Ericka Stephens-Rennie has put it, this is a story of rape.⁵ A story of deep and violent penetration, a story of sexual assault on a massive, indeed global, scale. And Klein is telling the story.

It is a story of empire. You see, if empire is a matter of systematic centralization of power secured by structures of socio-economic and military control, legitimated by powerful myths and sustained by ubiquitous images that seek to capture the imaginations of subjugated people, then 'disaster capitalism' well

⁵ Ibid.

names this corporatist empire and the shock doctrine is foundational to its imperial ideology.⁶

Klein insists that “certain ideologies are a danger to the public and need to be identified as such.” Specifically, “these are the closed, fundamentalist doctrines that cannot co-exist with other belief systems; their followers deplore diversity and demand an absolute free hand to implement their perfect system.” In such ideologies, “The world as it is must be *erased* to make way for their purist invention.”⁷

This is a purified vision of the world, and all who oppose this vision are filth who have no legitimate voice or place in this reborn world. If they cannot be cleansed, if they cannot be re-educated, re-indoctrinated, re-formed, then they cannot be saved and they must be cast out.

And Klein is pretty sure that this kind of an ideology has roots in biblical religion. And it is not just the fact that many of the proponents of this ideology happen to be right wing Christians (Donald Rumsfeld certainly comes to mind), but it has more to do with the inherent mythological foundations of the ideology. Again, she writes: “Rooted in biblical fantasies of great floods and great fires, [this ideology has] a logic that leads ineluctably toward violence. The ideologies that long for that impossible clean slate, which can be reached only through some kind of cataclysm, are the dangerous ones.”⁸

I come to this book from the perspective of Christian faith, and perhaps Klein’s deep aversion to certain kinds of biblical faith gives me an entry into the conversation. You see, while we might want to argue that biblical kinds of faith are not the only options for legitimating a clean-slate-purity kind of ideological violence (can we blame the Bible for Stalin, Mao, Suharto and all other ideological genocides?), it is clear that Klein is decidedly worried about such biblical metaphors of a flood that cleans all things for a fresh start, or language of a new creation, or apocalyptic images of cataclysmic fire. And I’ll return to all of that in a moment.

Notes Between the Bars

⁶ See Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p. 31.

⁷ Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, pp. 22-23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Before we go there, however, I want to say something more about what Klein is up to in this book. In the last chapter she writes:

A state of shock, by definition, is a moment when there is a gap between fast moving events and the information that exists to explain them. The late French theorist Jean Baudrillard described terrorist events as an 'excess of reality;' in this sense, in North America, the September 11 attacks were, at first, pure event, raw reality, unprocessed by story, narrative or anything that could bridge the gap between reality and understanding. Without a story, we are, as many of us were after September 11, intensely vulnerable to those people who are ready to take advantage of the chaos for their own ends. As soon as we have a new narrative that offers a perspective on the shocking events, we become reoriented and the world begins to make sense once again.⁹

Narratives make sense of reality. Without narrative there is deep confusion and disorientation, and in such a situation we are intensely vulnerable. That is why the CIA torture manual makes it clear that you separate the prisoners. Take away all stimuli that can help orient the prisoner to what time of day it is, to where he is, or to what is happening to him. And don't let prisoners talk to each other, because they will then compare notes, help keep each other oriented, share stories.

And what prisoners try to do in such a situation, is "to pass notes between the bars." Pass notes, share stories. You aren't crazy, this has happened to me as well! And this book is one large note passed between the bars. It is a long note that tells a new narrative and offers perspective, perhaps provides orientation in the midst of the disorientation of the shock therapy.

"All shock therapists," writes Klein, "are intent on the erasure of memory."¹⁰ But shock therapy – either on psychiatric patients, or in the torture cell, or in the machinations of the economy – can never totally erase memory. "(R)ecollections can be rebuilt, new narratives can be created. Memory, both individual and collective, turns out to be the greatest shock absorber of all."¹¹

And that is why, in the end, Klein is decidedly anti-revolutionary. The Friedmanites are the revolutionaries. Bush is a revolutionary. Pinochet and

⁹ Ibid., pp. 551-552.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 557.

¹¹ Ibid.

Suharto were the revolutionaries. They are all about erasing memories and creating clean slates. They all want to start again “from scratch.” Klein says that subjugated peoples, awakening from the shock-induced amnesia of their oppression, do not start from scratch again, but begin to start from the scraps. They start to pick their way through the rubble of their lives, the rubble of their economies, the rubble of what is left after the shock of war or water has hit, the rubble that is left after the shock of military intervention or market meltdown has played itself out, and they rebuild. They pick up the scraps of memory that remain and begin to piece together the story.

I think that this is profoundly right and deeply problematic. Profoundly right because it is out of the rubble that life is rebuilt – there are no blank slates, there is no *tabula rasa*, there is no pure state from which to begin. We are in the rubble – of our own lives and of the sheer brokenness of our world.

Rebuilding requires memory. Rebuilding requires a narrative that will make sense of our lives and give us orientation and direction in how we go about rebuilding our lives. And this book of passing notes between the bars, of telling the story of shock capitalism, is indispensable, indeed liberating in that rebuilding process.

Liberal Memories?

Klein’s narrative of shock capitalism, however, must itself be rooted in a larger narrative. There is an operative metanarrative at work in Klein’s book that gives her the perspective to discern and deconstruct the metanarrative of the Chicago Boys. There is a memory, a story at work here that she believes is a more healing narrative, a narrative that provides memories that can be foundational to the reconstruction of our lives post-disaster capitalism.

And that narrative, that vision, is nothing more radical than the kind of New Deal economics that we saw arise in the midst of the Great Depression. That vision is the liberal economic vision of John Maynard Keynes – or Keynesian economics. On one level, this is a non-controversial policy of nationalizing certain key sectors of the economy, investing in education and health care, and allowing the government to regulate the economy, even stimulate the economy for the sake of the broadest public good.

This is a liberal narrative, I say, because it does not radically depart from the fundamental principles of capitalism. While it promotes a mixed economy that allows for market freedom within the broader context of national economic policy, regulation and controls, it nonetheless is a capitalist economy that will

attempt to direct the operations of the market in ways that will be least damaging to the environment and the social fabric.

Here's my question. If post-disaster capitalism is a salvage operation, then is there enough to salvage here? Do the scraps of this older Keynesian economic vision, the memories of these older ideas and systems, provide us enough resources to engage in the rebuilding project in front of us? Is this memory, this liberal worldview, this story, deep enough, dense enough, thick enough to sustain us in the wake of the tsunami of the neo-liberal disaster?

I don't think so. My argument isn't with mixed economies per se (indeed I believe in a mixed economy, especially if it focuses on local economic sustainability) – no my problem is with the narrative underlying this Keynesian vision. This narrative, which is foundational to Klein's alternative story, is, I think too shallow, too thin, and lacks the kind of weight, substance and moral vision that we need in our times. Let me explain this a little further.¹²

The moral consternation of much "liberal" analysis of the neo-liberal disaster is rooted in memories of post-Depression industrial economies that attempted to shape economic life in a way that the most vulnerable were not constantly discarded and dismissed. But if we are to understand what happened between the demise of this liberal worldview and the present neo-liberal regime, then we need to ask questions of why that older liberal vision collapsed. Why did the liberal worldview that brought us the New Deal, together with state intervention to alleviate things like poverty and homelessness by means of a social safety net collapse? Is the shock doctrine sufficient to explain the shift?

There are many reasons why the welfare state was untenable, but I want to focus only on one – it was rooted in a thin narrative. The narrative of the kind of liberalism that brought us mixed economies and national economic policies was deeply rooted in a faith in economic growth. Bob Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange have described the welfare state as a post-care society.¹³ The first priority of society is to seek economic growth in the forms of ever increasing processes of

¹² This critique of liberal economics is based upon Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in an Age of Dislocation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, forthcoming 2008), pp. 108-109.

¹³ Bob Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange, *Beyond Poverty and Affluence: Toward a Canadian Economy of Care*, translated and edited by Mark Van der Vennen, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), p. 64.

production and consumption and an increase in the Gross National Product. At this point, liberalism and neo-conservatism are in agreement. But liberalism acknowledges that there will be casualties of economic growth. Not everyone will benefit equally from this growth and the “invisible hand” will not, on its own, raise the standard of living of all people. So there is a role for the state to care for the poor and to make sure that there is at least a modicum of income distribution so that the disadvantaged also may benefit from the economic growth of society as a whole. Neo-conservatives have greater faith (against all the evidence, as far as I can see!) in the powers of the market. Nonetheless, this liberal vision of the welfare state is a “post-care” society, because “care” comes only *after* economic growth. And here is its greatest weakness. The foundational assumption of a liberal welfare state is that economic growth and abundance is a never-ending dynamic of a capitalist society. As long as the economy is growing we can afford to redistribute wealth in small ways, we can afford to give everyone a chance to fulfill the “American dream,” we can afford to intervene when the invisible hand of the market economy doesn’t seem up to the job. But what happens when there is an economic downturn? What happens if things like the OPEC oil embargo, rising inflation and the success of the Asian economy in the 1970’s occasion an economic recession in the early 1980’s? What happens to our public responsibility to the poor when there is not the same kind of economic abundance to be spread around? What happens when the boom markets of the Asian tigers, or the slow but secure markets of Chile or Argentina experience radical melt down? What happens? Responsibility evaporates, liberalism dies, and neo-conservatism takes its place.

Naomi Klein’s friend, Linda McQuaig argues that the recession of the early 1980’s resulted in an exaggerated sense of scarcity and powerlessness.¹⁴ As government deficits increased it was concluded that we could no longer afford those earlier social welfare programs. A self-secure culture of affluence and liberal largesse was replaced by a culture of perceived scarcity which itself bred a sense of economic insecurity. In such a culture the habits of social responsibility and care (albeit in a post-care approach to society) dissipate together with the liberal narrative that gave them their cultural legitimacy.

The problem with the liberalism of the past was that it was *too shallow*. It was *too thin* of an ethic to sustain a sense of civic solidarity and responsibility to the poor when it was perceived that we couldn’t afford such responsibility anymore. Rooted as it was in an individualistic understanding of society, when the going got tough, self-interest again raised its ugly head. If Michael Walzer is

¹⁴ Linda McQuaig, *The Culture of Impotence: Selling the Myth of Powerlessness in the Global Economy* (Toronto: Penguin, 1999).

right in saying that home is “a dense moral culture,” then the problem with Western society – whether liberal or neo-conservative – is that it has no density, no foundation for an economics of care, an economics of justice.¹⁵

If it was an economic downturn that made the whole culture lose its ethical nerve and gave entry to neo-conservatism, then why doesn't an economic upturn result in a return to the ethical principles that for a while seemed too expensive? This would seem to be at the heart of much liberal consternation. It is no longer the early 80's; we are no longer in recession. At least in Canada there have been budgetary surpluses not deficits. So why don't we reinstate the programs that were dismantled? The money is there, the analysis is done, and we know that real people are in need of these programs. Don't we have a “moral obligation?” And the answer is, no. The economic growth of the last ten to fifteen years has done little to change the cultural mood regarding responsibility to the poor. That older liberal ethic, rooted as it was in assumptions of economic growth, has proven itself too shallow to sustain any kind of a renewed civic sense of responsibility that could creatively and ethically respond to the crisis of disaster capitalism. Once that liberalism died at the hands of the recession and the prophets of neo-conservatism, it would not rise again. The culture of fear has given birth to an ethos of individualism, scarcity, survivalism and withdrawal from social responsibility.

Klein could well respond to my concerns by insisting that she does not believe in a liberal individualism, but in a collectivist vision that insists upon communal responsibility and care. So do I. But the problem is that Klein hasn't provided us with a narrative that is rich enough to sustain such a vision, praxis and morality. I'm not saying that she couldn't, only that she hasn't.

Biblical Fantasies Revisited

Klein is clear, however, that anything like a biblical faith, rooted in Hebrew and Christian scripture, is definitely not the answer, but part of the problem. Remember that quote about biblical fantasies of great floods? Well, the very first words that we meet in this book – before Klein has told us any part of her story – is the epigraph that opens the first chapter:

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah, “I have

¹⁵ Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 16.

determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth.

Klein doesn't begin her book with Genesis 6.11-13 for a little religious inspiration. No, this text, and texts like it, she is arguing, provide mythic/symbolic legitimacy for the purist and fundamentalist ideology that she is exposing. Indeed the only other biblical text she quotes comes later in the book and it is from Revelation 21.5, "See, I am making all things new."

The suggestion is clear. From Genesis to Revelation, we meet a faith of destruction, or wiping slates clean in order to make all things new – a mythic worldview tailored for an ideology of radical economic purification!

The problem is that language of newness, language of a shifting of things so that the old order, the old status quo will be overthrown and real newness will be experienced in peoples' lives, tends to be received as good news by those who are most oppressed by the present order. Images of a new creation, a new day, a new order, indeed even a new city that replaces the old city – a New Jerusalem that replaces the repressive world of the old Babylon – are images of hope for the oppressed. These are images that subvert empires – whether Babylonian, Roman or corporatist American – precisely by proclaiming that these regimes are not eternal, they are not secure before the power and sovereignty of God. Empires don't really like newness. They like the same old thing. That's why in all of the regimes that Klein discusses, constitutional reforms are imposed that guarantee the economic structures of neo-liberalism even after potential political change.

But Klein is enough of a chastened leftist to know that such language of revolutionary newness is a double edged sword. This is dangerous language and can be easily employed in the interests of violently imposed economic and social oppression. Perhaps she can see this so clearly in Friedmanite economics because she has seen it happen in the economic revolutions of the left as well.

Nonetheless, if we are to engage Klein from a biblical perspective, then perhaps her citing of Genesis and Revelation gives me permission to revisit some of the bits of this narrative that are found in between.

My argument is simple. Klein's liberal, Keynesian narrative is too thin and not substantial enough to sustain the kind of economic restoration that she envisions and hopes for. My question is whether a biblical narrative might just be a thicker memory with more weight and more depth, and that it just might be able to sustain a vision, praxis and morality of economic justice and restoration.

So let me make just a few observations:

God says “oops...”

First, the difference between God’s notion of a clean slate and Milton Friedman’s is that God recognized that it didn’t work. Friedman, and most of his disciples, never said “oops.” They never looked at the wreckage of the economies that they had revolutionized or the lives that they had decimated and said, “well that didn’t work.” Nor did they ever say that they are sorry.

The God we meet – even in this ancient narrative of the flood – is precisely a God who says, “oops.” Real briefly, in Genesis 6 the narrative says that God saw in his own heart that there was nothing but violence and wickedness in the human heart and therefore decided that he would ‘blot them out’ from the face of the earth. Corruption this deep, this evil, needs to be cleaned out. Here is the clean slate ideology that Klein so despises.

But listen to what happens when the flood has been accomplished. Looking over the results of the flood, the results of the cosmic clean up campaign, God says, “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.” [Gen 8.21]

As far as I can see, God says, “oops.” If the same reason that God had to destroy the earth – namely the evil of the human heart – is the reason he gives for never doing that again, then the implication is clear: the flood didn’t work. Clean up campaigns like this don’t work because the issue is deeper than can be rectified by such destruction. The issue is the human heart, and floods, shocks, economic liberalization, war, torture and privatization can do nothing about that heart.

Covenant and Rape

So, second, what does God do? God makes covenant. God enters into a relationship with the human creature, God unites his already deeply grieving heart with the heart of the human creature that is full of nothing but the imaginations of evil. God enters into a relationship that is likely going to be an abusive relationship where God is the abused partner.

Let’s put it this way. If the imaginations of evil that Genesis describes are to take socio-historical and economic shape today, then it is likely to take the shape of shock torture of people’s bodies and the body-politic of nations. The imagination of evil takes the shape of violent abuse. The imagination of evil, the need for a shock that will ‘penetrate’ ever deeper into the body of a people’s psyche, economy and literal bodies, will take the shape of massive gang rape. And I

think we could say that the Chicago Boys, with their third world lackeys, and their Washington power brokers, are a violent gang who have been fucking the world for 35 years. Always penetrating more deeply! The Shock Doctrine is a legitimation for rape.

And here's what going on in Genesis 6. God sees that the human partner is a violent rapist and decides to enter covenant with such a violent partner. God enters into covenant, marries, a partner who is likely to do nothing but fuck around, do nothing but abuse him. I can see the future of this relationship and it is violence, it is murder. But God is not the perpetrator of this violence, God is the abused lover.

In the largest picture of the biblical narrative (and I acknowledge that there are bits that I am leaving out) the God we meet is a covenantal God who bears abuse at the hands of his covenant partner. God is an abused lover. And this God bears such abuse, bears such suffering precisely because this is a story that insists that the violence of the human heart, the violence that has captured the imagination of the human subject is overcome not through more violence, but through suffering love. Not the suffering love of passive recipients of injustice, though. No, this is the suffering love of God himself.

But this perhaps takes us too far afield. Let's think for a minute about the implication of covenant for economic life.

Sabbath and Jubilee: Shocking the System

My third observation is that the story of God in covenantal relationship with humanity is a story not of clean slates but of liberation. This is a God who hears the cries of disenfranchised slaves labouring under the impossible brick quotas of the empire and acts in history to set them free. This is a story of slaves set free.

This story of exodus liberation then gives birth to a covenantal understanding of economic life. You see, liberated people still have hearts filled with violence, they are still self-interested, and have imaginations taken captive by greed. So even in a community of liberated slaves there will still be oppression. Brother will oppress brother and sisters and mothers will be sold into slavery. Any economy in which broken, self-interested and sinful human beings are involved will in one way or another succumb to ideological violence.

So Israel's torah proposes an alternative economics. Not a naïve economics of purity, but an economics that recognizes the propensity of the powerful to oppress the weak and sets out to restrain such oppression. It is called the Year of Jubilee.

In brief, here is how it works. Every seventh year in Israel is called a sabbath year.¹⁶ On the sabbath year the land is given its rest. Note that this is an economics that begins with land. How you treat the land will give a clear indication of how you will treat the inhabitants of the land. So the legislation begins with land. Every seventh year the land is to receive its rest. Rest for regeneration, rest from being subject to ceaseless production, rest to enjoy being the land. Why should land get its sabbath? Because all land is covenant land. God's covenant established back in that Noah story wasn't just with human beings but with all of creation.

So what kind of an economics is this? It is an economics of respect for the land. It is an economics of rest, not ceaseless toil. And it is an economics of trust. You see, if you don't plant crops in the seventh year then you have to have a deep trust in the covenantal God that your faithfulness in granting the land its rest will be blessed with an economic abundance in the sixth year that will carry and sustain you through the seventh year and until the harvest at the end of the eighth year.

And if you are going to have such an economics of trust, rest and respect, then it will have to be an economics of enough. This kind of an economic vision can't be driven by an insatiable desire for never ceasing growth precisely because the sabbath year puts a radical check on any such aspirations for ceaseless growth.

All of this would be radical enough, but so far we have only talked about land. We have only talked about the sabbath year. Here's the kicker. After seven sabbath years, that is 7X7 years, that is after the 49th year, then the 50th year is proclaimed as the sabbath of sabbaths. Upon the blowing of the horn to proclaim the Day of Atonement, in the fiftieth year, Jubilee is proclaimed and all who have lost their lands or who have been sold into slavery are to receive their land back and to be set free from slavery.¹⁷

The Day of Atonement and the year of Jubilee that it announces is a day of forgiveness of all debts. This is the day, and this is the year, of return: return to their God, return to their land, return to economic liberty, return covenantal life in the land, return to an equal standing in the community. Atonement is about

¹⁶ See Leviticus 25.

¹⁷ The Jubilee year is another sabbath. As such this kind of an economic vision of homecoming requires an even deeper trust than we have already seen is the case for the regular sabbath years. By proclaiming Jubilee, by providing for atonement throughout the economy, the community must trust that God will bless the crops of the 48th year so that the community will be sustained for three years, that is, until the harvest of the 51st year.

setting things right; setting all things right. And when people are restored to community and when economic relations are set right again, then the master/slave distinction must collapse, the unjust division between rich and poor must be overthrown and the reality of some folks having possession of land and the resources for economic well-being while others are dispossessed and left destitute must be rectified through a radical economic redistribution.

Let there be no mistake. This is something of a shock doctrine. The economy is radically shocked. This is not a shock to institutionalize further oppression, however, but a shock that creates a level playing field, restrains the appetites and power of the rich, and provides new economic opportunity for the poor. This says, the torah, is how we provide for the redemption of the land. This is, if you will, not shock and awe, but shock and grace. A shock to the economic system precisely to create space for grace, for forgiveness, for new beginnings.

This is, of course, an audacious vision. This is an economics that recognizes self-interest and puts covenantal checks and limits on that self-interest. This is a redemptive economy in the face of business as usual.

Of course the question that invariable comes up is, did this ever happen? Did they ever actually practice Jubilee in ancient Israel? And I find it interesting that this is the first question. You see I think we want to hear that it never happened precisely so we can discount this accounting of economic life as impractical.

I think that the more important issue is that such a vision of life was imaginable in ancient Israel. It was imaginable precisely because it arose out of the experience of a Creator God who created a good creation, a covenant God who promised to bring shalom-blessing in all of life, and a liberating God who sets slaves free. This story gives rise to this kind of economic vision. It is precisely this kind of Jubilee vision that then functioned as the basis for judgement on oppressive economic structures as they arose in Israel, and as the basis and foundation for hope when Israel found itself subject to one more empire after another.

The Jesus School of Economics

When Jesus came to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth and they handed him the Isaiah scroll he took a few minutes to find the place in the scroll where the prophet employed Jubilee language to provide hope for his community labouring under the shock and awe of the Babylonian empire.¹⁸

¹⁸ This story comes from Luke 4.16-30. The text that Jesus quotes is from Isaiah 61.1-2.

And Jesus read from Isaiah:

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 captives
 and recovery of sight to the blind,
 to let the oppressed go free,
 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

And then he rolled up the scroll gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And everyone in the synagogue was looking at him. What would Jesus say about this prophecy? Here is a word that all the oppressed folks in Nazareth had hung their lives on. Here was a social and economic vision of liberation. Here was that old vision of Jubilee voiced again in the midst of oppression, voiced again in the midst of disorientation and confusion, voiced again to a shocked people awed by the military might and economic control of the Roman empire. What would Jesus say about this vision?

He sat down and said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Today, he said. Today is the year of the Lord's favour. Today is the year of Jubilee. Today, in my presence and in my proclamation, is Jubilee. The poor hear good news, captives are set free from prisons, and the oppressed are set free. Today, the shocked and awed people of South America hear good news. Today, the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib are set free. Today, those who have been oppressed by IMF structural adjustment programs, trade liberalization, privatization and exclusion from economic life ... today they go free.

Well you can imagine the response. Isn't this Joseph's son? Isn't this one of our local lads whose done good? Wasn't that wonderful? Wasn't that profound, exciting and gracious? Liberation is at hand, our oppressors will be defeated, some Roman heads are going to roll, some business executives are going to die in the World Trade Centre, we are going to make America crumble and beg for mercy ...

Wait a minute. Jesus didn't say that. In fact, if I listen closely enough I notice that he dropped something from that Isaiah reading. Didn't Isaiah follow that line about the favourable year of the Lord, that reference to Jubilee, with something about a day of vengeance? Doesn't Jubilee redemption and liberation require a settling of accounts? Don't we need a clean slate? Don't we need to purify covenantal life by getting rid of the pollution of the empire? Don't we need to see

some vengeance on Rome, on the IMF, on America? Where's the vengeance stuff? Why did he drop the line of vengeance?

And where did that line about giving sight to the blind come from? Isaiah didn't say that. Why did Jesus add that into his reading? What game is he playing here? Is it possible to have an economic revolution, a Jubilee shocking of the economic system without there being the vengeance of wiping the slate clean?

And the answer is, not in the way that Jesus enacts Jubilee. If Friedmanite economics is about cleaning out the impure, then the economy of Jesus is found in his embracing of the unclean, his fraternization with the impure, his partying with the excluded. If shock capitalism is about taking control of the economy for the benefit of the rich and at the violent exclusion of the poor, then the economy of Jesus is about throwing parties and inviting those who are never invited. His is an economy of radical generosity. His is an economy that tells the rich man to sell everything that he has and give it to the poor. His is an economy of radical inclusion. His is an economy that prays, "forgives us our debts as we forgive our debtors." His is an economy of enough that tells the rich man who keeps building bigger and bigger barns to hoard his wealth that he is a fool. His is an economy of the kingdom of God, which says that those who are first will be last, that to be great in this kingdom is to be the servant of all.

But what about that violent heart? What about that violent covenant partner? What's going to happen to the violence? Okay, so Jesus won't allow for a kingdom built on vengeance, he won't allow for a kingdom of violent exclusion of anyone, even our oppressors. But what can he do about the violence in the human heart? Where is all that violence going to go? Where is that human propensity to shock and awe each other with sheer power, and violent control, going to finally play itself out.

Well, it plays itself out on the cross. The economy of Jesus is an economy of violence. But it is not the violence of God set up to clean up an impure world. It is the violence of the world poured out on the holiest of all. It is the violence of the empire that does it worst by putting our covenant lover on an imperial cross.

Tom Wright, puts it this way: "The cross was not the defeat of *Christ* at the hands of the *powers*. It was the defeat of the powers at the hands – yes the bleeding hands – of Christ."¹⁹ Or consider the way Andrew Lincoln, puts it, "The powers of evil are defeated not by some overwhelming display of divine power, but the

¹⁹ N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 19.

weakness of Christ's death.... the death of the victim, who has absorbed the destructive forces of the powers, becomes precisely the point at which their domination is decisively brought to an end. Their claims, their accusations, their oppressive and divisive influence have all been subverted by a very different power: the power of the victim on the cross."²⁰

I am prepared to say that the powers of disaster capitalism are powers of domination.²¹ They are powers of oppression and division. What we need is a story more radical than theirs. What we need is a narrative that can see the defeat of these powers, not by violent power defeating violent power, but by the power of self-sacrificial love defeating the power of oppression. The shock of the cross meets the grace of God. The shock of the empire is overthrown by radical love. The shock doctrine is transformed by Jubilee.

What we need is an economy of care. What we need is an economy that says that care for the earth, care for the human community, careful stewardship of common resources for the benefit of all are foundational requirements of all economic life. What we need is an economy that begins with care – a pre-care economy rather than a post-care economy. A pre-care economy that reverses the relationship between economic growth and care for the vulnerable by prioritizing justice over narrowly conceived notions of economic efficiency. A pre-care economy that is rooted in an economics of respect, rest, trust and enough. An economy that considers justice, compassion, community, good work and ecological responsibility as points of departure for economic life, not as (necessary) afterthoughts.²²

Such an economy is impossible, however, without a transformation of the violence of the human heart into a heart of love, a heart of communal care and solidarity. Such an economy is impossible as long our imaginations are held captive by self-interest and narrowly conceived economic growth. What we need, I believe, is a transformed imagination. An imagination reshaped in the

²⁰ Andrew T. Lincoln, "The Letter to the Colossians," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 11:628.

²¹ See Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

²² Again, I am indebted to Goudzwaard and deLange, *Beyond Poverty and Affluence*, and these ideas are developed at greater length and with specific reference to issues of homelessness in Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, ch. 4.

image of the one who bears the image of God. An imagination transformed through sacrificial love. An imagination shaped by the story of Jesus.

Milton Friedman is right: “only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change.” Indeed, it is precisely his kind of economics that has helped to create the kind of economic, ecological and geo-political crises that characterize our time. And he is also right when he says that “the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.” But he wasn’t thinking of ideas in the rubble. He wasn’t thinking of reaching back into deeper memories of liberation. He wasn’t thinking of tapping into the deepest longings of the human heart for homecoming, for return, for justice, for equality. Perhaps, just perhaps, there are some biblical ideas lying around in the rubble. Perhaps lying around in the rubble of the church we might find some stories, some ideas, some vision that will not legitimate ideological clean-up campaigns but will engender a rebuilding rooted in memories of sacrificial love, memories of Jubilee.