


An abstract painting featuring a central eye-like shape with a dark, swirling iris. The surrounding colors are vibrant and swirling, including yellows, oranges, purples, blues, and reds, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall composition is circular and organic.

Leadership, God's Agency, & Disruptions

CONFRONTING MODERNITY'S WAGER

Mark Lau Branson
Alan J. Roxburgh



Leaders in congregations and Christian organizations wrestle with an unraveling of the world in which they have little experience and training. While they are offered unending resources by experts on leadership, some with claims to biblical blueprints, the challenges seem mismatched to those methods. Branson and Roxburgh frame the situation as one in which “modernity’s wager”—the conviction that God is not necessary for life and wisdom and meaning—has defined the Western imagination. Because churches and leaders are colonized by this ethos, even when God is named and beliefs are claimed, approaches to leadership are blind to God’s agency. Branson and Roxburgh approach this challenge as a work in practical theology, attending to our cultural context, narratives of God’s disruptive initiatives in Scripture, and a reshaping of leadership theories with a priority on God’s agency. With years of experience as teachers, consultants, and guides, they name practices which lead to more faithful participation. *Leadership, God’s Agency, and Disruptions* is wide-ranging in cultural and biblical scholarship, challenging in its engagement with numerous leadership studies, and practical with its focus toward the on-the-ground life of churches and organizations.

“What does theology look like after the so-called ‘practical turn’? If some might still think such a ‘turn’ is optional, this book calls that bluff: scriptural reading and theological reflection are situated in a dynamic ‘in-between space’ that enables ongoing inquiry into and discernment about God’s agency in a fluid world through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. This is not about divine usefulness but about Christian leadership and discipleship being continually renewed and reformed by what God is doing.”

—**AMOS YONG**, Fuller Theological Seminary

Mark Lau Branson is the Homer Goddard Professor of Ministry of the Laity at Fuller Theological Seminary. He focuses on contexts and leadership, and how God’s people can attend to God’s initiatives. He is the author of *Memories, Hopes & Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry, Missional Engagement, & Congregational Change*, and (with Juan Martínez) *Churches, Cultures and Leadership*.

Alan J. Roxburgh is a pastor, seminary professor, and mentor in leadership and missional transformation, and has written thirteen books on missional leadership and culture change. In his work he addresses questions of church and mission, convinced the Spirit is fermenting a movement of God’s people that can’t be contained in narratives of renewal, reform, or fixing existing systems.

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—AMOS YONG

Fuller Theological Seminary

“*Leadership, God’s Agency, and Disruptions* is a wonderfully brilliant book by two world class thinkers on leadership. Read it and allow the leadership you have known to be unraveled. Know that, by the time you’re finished reading, you’ll be re-constructed as a Christian leader. Instead of techniques, you’ll be given a new way of being that is found in the very center of God’s agency, not your own.”

—DAVID FITCH

Northern Seminary

“In a noisy field of Christian leadership books touting the secrets to effective ministry, Branson and Roxburgh have raised a clarion call to reorient leadership around God’s agency rather than management techniques. Its biblical depth and theological rigor may make you doubt you’ve ever read a book that deserves to be called a ‘theology of leadership’ before. This masterpiece of practical theology is now my go-to recommendation on leadership for teachers and practitioners.”

—CHRISTOPHER B. JAMES

University of Dubuque Theological Seminary

“There are many books that offer descriptors of that which is wrong with the church in the Western world. Few, however, offer a way forward that is not merely a reflection of the current fixation of the West with methods, techniques, and programmes. . . . Mark and Alan’s offering brings together a well-tuned intellectual and academic perception, practical engagement in ministry, and a significant insight into what the journey ahead might be.”

—MARTIN ROBINSON

ForMission College, Birmingham, United Kingdom

Leadership, God's Agency, and Disruptions

Confronting Modernity's Wager

MARK LAU BRANSON

and ALAN J. ROXBURGH



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LEADERSHIP, GOD'S AGENCY, AND DISRUPTIONS
Confronting Modernity's Wager

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Mark dedicates this book to the four “Dons” who connected scripture, context, and attention to God in ways that formed his imagination and practices for church and leadership:

Dr. Don Williams
Dr. Donald Buteyn†
Bishop Donald Green
Dr. Donald Gelpi, SJ†

Alan dedicates this book to four people who over the years were huge influences on his imagination in leadership:

John McLaverty, whose love, humour, wisdom
and presence have carried me
Wally Mills, a tool and die maker who modelled love and leadership
Dr. Paul Gooch, one of my early teachers
who nurtured a love of philosophy
Dr. Martin Robinson, a wise friend who shows me
gracious ways of leading

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Introduction

THIS IS A BOOK about leadership. But it's not a generalized book about leadership for all kinds of leaders across all sectors within late modern societies. This is a book written for Christian leaders working within all kinds of systems—from congregations/parishes, to denominational systems, educational institutions, and not-for-profit organizations shaped by a Christian imagination. The emphasis on *Christian* leaders is important. We are proposing that a Christian imagination, dwelling inside the Christian story of God's engagement and involvement in the world in Jesus Christ, cannot be secondary to or background support for leadership that has been developed inside other stories. Our experiences indicate that leaders in these organizations, whether or not they reflect on their work, are inside other narratives, such as the social sciences or the latest models that emerge from the business world. This is not to denigrate the value and insight that can be found from within these models or proposals. Rather, we are arguing that the starting point for a consideration of the practice of leadership as Christians must come from a radically different source. Indeed, we will argue that a priority on theology will radically relativize understandings of leadership that have become normal defaults for a majority of Christian leaders across the late modern West.

Alan was recently in a small city located in a coastal mountain range in the Pacific Northwest. Fifteen leaders from church and not-for-profit organizations were gathering for their weekly morning of breakfast and conversation about being the church in our time. This group was intriguing because of their diversity and the degree of mutual respect. Many were evangelicals who would probably run the range from moderately right of center to just left of center in terms of politics and social values. Others would describe themselves as progressives, leaning much to the left on such matters. With all these differences, they demonstrated a care for each other

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and a readiness to listen with a sense of trust that must have developed slowly over time.

While noting the significant differences among these leaders, Alan became aware of striking similarities. They were all wrestling with questions about what it means to be faithful people of God in our current cultural milieu. This general question, inevitably, kept leading them back to their churches and congregations—these places where God's people gather to worship and figure out together what it means to be Christian today. The invitation to Alan was rooted in their interest in missiologist Lesslie Newbigin. They knew that Newbigin had addressed important matters concerning the modern world, living in plural societies, and rethinking theology in ways that shaped us to participate in God's mission.¹ As Alan continued this reflective work with these leaders he introduced the term "Euro-tribal churches."² This concept is a shorthand for noting the roots of these leaders and their organizations. Their denominations and theological traditions had been formed as Europe moved into the modern era. And that meant that their organizational and leadership habits had been shaped by numerous cultural forces that were more powerful than their espoused theology. Two themes, which we will engage in later chapters, can help explain what we mean. First, the concept of "Modernity's Wager" posits that the primary characteristic of modernity has not been the great ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but what has undergirded these ideologies, a conviction that life can be lived well without God. This overarching belief has now settled deep into the bones, sinews, habits, and defaults of the Western imagination. This wager has overwhelmingly colonized the churches (no matter what the stripe—left or right, conservative or progressive) and it now shapes their understanding and practice of leadership.

The second (and related) characteristic of Euro-tribal churches is described by the French philosopher and somewhat Christian mystic Simone Weil. For her, it wasn't any one of the great "isms" of these centuries but what she called technical rationality and, along with it, beginning in the early decades of the last century, the development of a whole culture of technocratic elites—professionals trained in the best methods of the social sciences to manage and control the systems and organizations for which they were trained to lead. This is the world in which almost all Christian leaders have been formed and for which they were professionalized (earning

1 See Roxburgh, *Structured for Mission; Joining God; and Practices for the Refounding* (with Martin Robinson).

2. We are indebted to the work of Jehu Hanciles for the introduction of the tribal nature of European Christianity, from which our term "Euro-tribal" arises; see his brilliant analysis of the Western Christian situation: *Beyond Christendom*, 88–92.

degrees and ordination). This has been the world in which Christian leaders have learned to operate and practice their calling.

As the morning continued among these leaders, Alan was aware of several important themes in their conversations. First, there was no disagreement with the proposition that almost all churches within the Euro-tribal denominations are wrestling with the issues of their own unraveling. This theme was woven into almost every issue that arose. Even those with successful churches (measured by some as growth and by others as stable and active organizations) recognized that they were largely disoriented and often anxious. Second, there was no argument that most of the activities of these leaders in such churches was continually directed toward finding ever new ways of “fixing” the churches and getting them back to some form of “health” (always an empty, ambiguous word waiting to be filled by someone’s bright ideas about growth, evangelism, diversity, or social action). Third, it was helpful to give language to what is happening not just to these churches concerning their unraveling but also the wider culture of late modern states and societies. Those around the table could all express their dis-ease with what was happening across society—economic disparity, gender debates, differences over immigration, political dysfunction—and they noted the continual formation of ever more defensive sub-groups. Leaders were often at a loss concerning how to engage the proliferating camps that adopted variations of partisan names—left/right, conservative /liberal/progressive—often with variations regarding victim culture and political correctness.

What was interesting about elements of this conversation was that the ways of explaining what was happening were not, to use a word, theological—but socio-cultural and political. They were based on one form or another of models, experiences, and frameworks borrowed from every field except that of a theological reflection on the nature of God’s engagement with the world in and through Jesus Christ. It was not that these leaders weren’t deeply committed Christian men and women; it was that their basic frameworks were formed by the socio-cultural paradigms coming primarily from the social sciences, psychology, and the business world. God as agent was largely absent from the conversation. This is fully consistent with Modernity’s Wager—we have all been formed, whether in church or seminary or other social structures—to be blind to God’s agency. This wager has overwhelmingly colonized the churches (no matter what the stripe—left or right, conservative or progressive) and now shapes their understanding and practice of leadership. Indeed, this default is so powerful that the notion of Christian leadership being about forming communities where God is experienced as the primary agent represents a powerful idea but has little to no content.

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Mark has had numerous parallel conversations in both church and academic settings. In a conversation among students and professors, regarding the purpose and methods of practical theology, those in the room voiced how much they appreciated how they were gaining the tools offered by other disciplines—cultural studies, organizational and leadership studies, migration studies, social theory, personality theories, Christian social ethics. Most frameworks for practical theology seek out correlations between these fields and the classic seminary studies in theology, church history, and biblical studies. Then Mark and a colleague asked a question, “What if practical theology is not about finding correlation—what if our core task is, as leaders, to engage groups so that together we discern what God is doing and we take steps toward faithful participation? What if this is what ‘doing theology’ means?” As Alan noted in the Pacific Northwest gathering, there was genuine and appreciative interest—while also a deep sense that our habits and skills did not move in this direction.

In both of these experiences, the conversations took a familiar turn. The questions immediately focused on “How?” Quickly, the conversations slipped into questions of how to go about engaging the ways Modernity’s Wager has colonized the churches and their leadership. Several things emerged from that turn in the conversation. We observed both the encouragement that the challenges were being named and owned—while the questions about next steps were still deeply formed by the old narrative that was shaping the problem. Again, in both conversations, participants then observed and named this misstep. Numbers of them, in their questions and later conversations, intuitively grasped that confronting Modernity’s Wager would not be about learning another technique or method that could be applied to a problem as a fix. One could detect in their conversation this resistance to technique that we are seeing among so many leaders. Something has happened over the past five to ten years that suggests that the Spirit is already disrupting the taken-for-granted presumptions that leadership is about finding techniques to fix the challenges faced by the churches. One could see in the faces of these leaders the awareness that this well-worn road could no longer be taken.

Leaving that meeting with those wonderful leaders, Alan was aware again that the Spirit is in a process of not just unraveling the forms of church and social life that have shaped Modernity’s Wager, but the Spirit is already ahead of us fermenting a radically different kind of church that can call forth forms of society that are more directed toward kingdom life. What this calls for are leaders whose imagination and practices are shaped far less by the existent models of human agency and far more about discerning the ways in which God is present as agent in the process of calling into being

the kingdom. This book is about the kinds of journeys this will require from leaders today.

To some extent this disruptive context in which we now operate as leaders is about location. Overall, the Euro-tribal churches and their leaders have operated in a space of expertise and the correlative assumptions so that we have been positioned to not only know what is needed but also have the technical skills to manage desired outcomes. The unraveling world that is now before us invites leaders into a radically different theological imagination about our location as leaders and churches. In this book we introduce a metaphor we will use to provide theological perspective on the location of leadership. That metaphor is space-between. As we will contend in the following chapters, God, who is the primary agent in the world, comes to us in a particular kind of way—without the pretense of power and control. God meets us in this space-between where there can be neither power nor control. This theological imagination, we argue, must now form the basis of Christian leadership and must become the means of assessing all other leadership models we choose to take up.

This book presents a theology of leadership. This does not mean that it presents a supportive theological rationale for some model of leadership nor for the leadership theories drawn from the social sciences or other modern frameworks. It is written from the assumption that the basis of leadership within the Christian narrative begins with the question of God and what God is doing in the world. In this book we offer ways of asking this critical question drawn from both Scripture and from theological convictions concerning God's agency in contexts of massive unraveling.

We will approach our work in three parts, plus two bridges. In part I we will introduce how we will engage Scriptures, explore the complexities of cultural forces in late modernity, and name some key theological matters. In part II we expand our biblical work with chapters on Jeremiah, Matthew, Acts, and Ephesians. In part III we name the role of metaphors and then explore key practices for leadership that are shaped by God's agency. The two intermezzos provide bridges between the parts. Intermezzo 1 names practical theology as a practice; intermezzo 2 frames the final chapters as matters of *habitus* and practices.

We are very aware that we write as participants in various overlapping circles of friends and colleagues. We have learned together as we taught classes, led consulting projects, hosted webinars, and spent countless hours with hundreds of church leaders—doing *lectio*, praying, conversing, imagining, hoping. Complete lists are impossible. When Mark wrote a chapter for

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Craig Van Gelder,³ and then asked for his feedback on another article, Craig said Mark needed to author a book focused on engagements with Scripture; Mark said “maybe in ten years”—but it took a bit longer, and collaborations with Alan in other labors led to partnership here. As we complete the manuscript, Mark acknowledges that colleagues and students at Fuller Theological Seminary have fostered and fed his research, creativity, teaching, and leadership for over two decades. The Academy of Religious Leadership has been a learning community of professors, researchers, and leaders who have listened to, read, critiqued, and encouraged the development of materials that ended up on these pages. The Ekklesia Project has provided an annual gathering of friends who invest their lives in the kind of theological praxis and faithful practices that we encourage here. Alan has many of the same people who have influenced and shaped his thinking around leadership and theology, both in terms of mentors and important co-learners over a long journey. In the early days, the Gospel and Our Culture Network, with friends like Pat Keifert and Craig Van Gelder, was a source of learning and partnership in starting to work on these ideas of leadership (and these meetings were where we, the two coauthors of this book, met). Alan and Martin Robinson founded the *Journal of Missional Practice*, and over the last decade it has been a generative conversation space for both of us as we work with colleagues in the UK like Paul Weston, Sally Mann, and Harvey Kwiyani. Our thanks also go to colleagues like Juan Martinez, Chris James, Ian Douglas, and many others who show up in our footnotes.

3. Branson, “Ecclesiology and Leadership.”

PART I: FRAMING

CHAPTER 1

God's Agency and Biblical Narratives

INTRODUCTION

WE ARE WRITING THIS book in a context of significant confusion for many North American churches and their leaders around questions of identity and practice.¹ Euro-tribal churches are characterized by declining participation, continued transience across religious communities, and waning of respect from the neighborhoods and communities within which they are located. Paralleling these challenges is a flurry of what gets described as late modern expressions of church that attract participants who tend to drop out or move on to the next new version of “contemporary” church. These churches market niche churches, such as multi-site mega-gatherings focused on worship bands and preaching, that bring a strong preacher into neighborhoods (sometimes with local music and an assistant pastor) via social media in efforts to market some ethos like inclusive, authentic, non-traditional, or diverse.² Some interpret these newer forms of church as responses to generational shifts; others critique them as being little more than adjustments to taste and preference. Some observers have concluded that

1. We are focused on North American churches from Euro-tribal traditions. As researchers and practitioners we have limited experience alongside other groups in North America and elsewhere. While we are grateful when colleagues from other cultures commend what we are advancing, we are still aware of important distinctives. For an introduction to these challenges, see Branson and Martínez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership*.

2. Our desire is not to disparage the appropriate local expressions, but to note that they have been turned into marketing lures.

these are signs of the end of Protestantism.³ None of these experiments and innovations have halted the drift of Protestant churches as the new language of the “dones,” “nones,” and “gones” indicates.⁴

Frequently we hear from those who know they are manufacturing temporary fixes to these challenges. They say that they are overwhelmed by the constant demands for vision, innovation, staffing, and more committed participation (often described in terms of the need for programs that ramp up substantive discipleship in congregations). We agree with people's suspicions concerning these efforts to address the unraveling of Christian life in North America. Nor do we believe the proposals that dodge challenges by putting the responsibilities on magic available from millennials.⁵ This book is being written from a very different starting place. It is formed out of the conviction that right in these contexts that overwhelm and discourage, God is up to something far bigger and more important than fixing Euro-tribal churches or making them more attractive and relevant. We see God out ahead of us, fully engaged in the places where believers live and among the neighborhoods where they dwell. This turning requires the formation of a new social imaginary of leadership. Along with pastor friends who are already seeing and practicing this new imaginary, we want to dig into the contextual challenges and theological resources for its formation. God is revealing the way of Jesus out ahead of us in the form of risk-forming relationships with the people in our communities. This book is about the shape and practices of leadership that center on joining God in local contexts. These directions are not, in any way, intended to deny the work of ecclesiology,⁶ but we are convinced that in the crisis of Christian life now confronting Euro-tribal churches, ecclesiology must be formed in retrospect. Ecclesiology must be the reflective response to a missiology that is shaped around joining God in the local.⁷ With that theological core, this book is focused on the question of leadership—what kind of leadership promotes a way of life that pays attention to God's initiatives?

This chapter begins our inquiry in Scripture. With multiple parallels to our situation, the varied biblical authors of this chapter address believers who are, in diverse ways, just as confused, traumatized, questioning, discouraged, and clueless as we ourselves. Jeremiah, Matthew, Luke, and Paul

3. Leithart, *End of Protestantism*.

4. The “nones” designation has been used by Pew Research Center to refer to those who are unaffiliated with any religion, then the terms “gones” and “dones” have gained attention in less technical observations. See Pew Research Center, “‘Nones’ on the Rise.”

5. See Seel, *The New Copernicans*.

6. See Micheal Goheen's fine book on this subject, *Church and Its Vocation*.

7. See Weston, “Leslie Newbigin.”

make a singular claim: God is active. And there is a corollary: we are invited to participate, to join with God. Jeremiah, who countered the official palace version of God's priorities in the midst of the Babylonian invasion, dared claim that Israel needed to be converted to different interpretive perspectives and accompanying practices. Matthew, aware of disruptive events that challenged the church of Antioch, wrote a narrative about Jesus that sought to arouse this community to how God's initiatives were continuing after Jesus' resurrection and ascension and for them to join in what God was doing. In writing Acts, Luke knew that his readers, perhaps like the apostles in Jerusalem, had trouble interpreting how the jarring actions of Holy Spirit should be understood, so he repeats the stories told by Peter and Cornelius multiple times in the hope that repetition would increase awareness of God's initiatives. Paul's letter to the churches of Asia Minor, present in our New Testament as the Epistle to the Ephesians, does not dismiss the fierce challenges those churches faced in the form of Rome and the economies of the pagan gods—rather, he proclaims that God's on-the-ground activities were inviting them to practices of risky discernment and participation.⁸

These authors, attending to different places and diverse times, are neither dispassionate nor disengaged. They are deeply implicated in their own narratives. Their accounts about God and the options available to their readers frequently push against what those readers were assuming. And, more relevant to our writing from the context of late modern Christian communities, they offer narratives and perspectives that push into our own models, frameworks, and habits of learning and leadership. This opening chapter begins a process of what we believe to be critical work: paying attention. Our argument is that, overall, the Euro-tribal churches have not paid attention to the agency of God in a disruptive world but have subsumed God's agency to models and frameworks borrowed from the narratives of late modernity (see chapter 2). Therefore, one of the critical practices to be cultivated is that of how we pay attention to what God is already doing ahead of us. Discernment is more critical than innovation.

We write as practical theologians. By that term we do not mean that this is a book of functionalist, pragmatic steps. We are doing theology—which means the book is at the overlap of conversations regarding Scripture, theology, social history, contemporary experiences of churches in North America, leadership theories and habits, and opportunities for discerning and joining with God's initiatives.⁹ But by *doing theology* we do

8. In part II, these four biblical books will each receive chapter-length attention. We are using traditional references regarding authorship. In part II we will reference commentaries and scholarly materials that engage those debates.

9. In intermezzo 1 we will provide more details on our approach to “practical

not mean we are just working with ideas—rather God's agency is assumed and doing theology is about discerning and embodying God's apocalypse or revelation. This "doing theology" is also about where we prioritize our "paying attention." We are arguing that it is the conviction of God as agent that should determine our engagement with models and practices of leadership rather than that our understanding of God be fitted into and subsumed beneath the models and frameworks we adopt. We believe that by attending to these biblical texts, we are awakened to the radical priority God's agency and, thereby, will be more available to a shift in leadership assumptions and practices. What we see in Scripture is this continual work of the Spirit wrestling with communities of God's people in order for them to grasp this always radically new place from which we are to engage our situation. It is to be the primacy of God's agency that determines our leadership frames, not, as is currently the case, the offering of theological rationales as support for the claims of various models of leadership drawn from other sources. In what follows we examine this dynamic of God's agency at work in a series of biblical texts drawn from both testaments.

JEREMIAH

Six hundred years before Jesus, Judah was facing the turmoil of internal anomie while being challenged from the outside by the Babylonian Empire. In that context, the prophet Jeremiah was countering the theopolitical praxis of official Judaism. We propose that Jeremiah's leadership at the cusp of the Babylonian exile gives us access to the challenges Christians today face in North America. Jeremiah provides insights into the work of leadership that faces the unraveling of its established world. As the book shows, plans and power are not foremost in Jeremiah's leadership approach. He contested those with plans, those who assumed they had power. So our reference to Jeremiah's leadership prompts the question, "In what manner is Jeremiah a leader?" It is not uncommon for Jeremiah's ministry to be interpreted as a failure because he did not convince Judah's officials to change course.¹⁰ The narrative is set up in Jeremiah 1 with references regarding relational connections to religious persons (" . . . son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth" 1:1 NRSV) and Jeremiah works with scribes (Baruch and Seraiah). Also, the influential family of Shaphan appears in this beginning chapter to provide some political access and protection for the prophet (Jer 26, 39, 40). Finally, various texts indicate that Jeremiah apparently has some

theology and discernment."

10. Schreiber, "Rethinking Jeremiah."

level of access to King Zedekiah (Jer 21, 37, 38, 39). These and other notations give us clues to the existence of a small group among whom Jeremiah at least had limited access and influence. As Walter Brueggemann writes, “These elements of personal history . . . altogether suggest that Jeremiah is located in a subversive body of opinion in Jerusalem that was opposed to royal policy and that supported Jeremiah as the point person for more widely but dangerously held views.”¹¹

The text also gives witness to God’s perspective: “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD” (1:7–8 NRSV). The task given to Jeremiah is described in very large terms: “I’m putting my words in your mouth. This very day I appoint you over nations and empires, to dig up and pull down, to destroy and demolish, to build and plant” (1:9–10). For those who wonder if God is involved in Israel and in the wider world, these opening verses make substantive claims about God’s initiatives, and, because God is involved, about Jeremiah’s collaborative agency. These verses are proposing that in all the unraveling there is already the radically new that, paralleling Lesslie Newbigin’s proposals, calls into question all previous assumptions and all inherited tradition. God’s activity is in fact the primal truth by which all else has to be confronted and questioned.¹²

Because leadership can only be understood in light of context, we need to survey some important aspects of Jeremiah’s time and place. The kings of Israel and Judah lived and ruled on a strip of land between continents, in the midst of regional tribes and between superpowers. They were constantly weighing political, economic, and military options. Frequently they were in conversations with prophets who claimed to speak for God, and the differences between Jeremiah and those contemporary voices clarify much of what is happening in this book.

Israel (before it was divided) chose this royal form of national life when they asked God to give them a human king (something God opposed; see 1 Sam 8). They envied other nations and the apparent power and honor that accompanied kings and palaces. In this way they were hedging their bets, concluding something like: “We want God’s provision and protection, but, based on what we see in the world around us, there are benefits to having a human king.” God warned them that this would increase taxes, lead to a standing army, and bring on accompanying temptations, but they wanted both God and royalty. God makes clear that this preference was more about

11. Brueggemann, *To Build, To Plant*, 32.

12. Newbigin, *Light*, 2.

theology than management—Israel was rejecting him (1 Sam 8:7–8). There are parallels here to what we described in the introduction as Modernity's Wager in the modern West, and to the choices churches are making. Life without dependence on God looks like a viable plan, this wager claims. We can engage God for personal or social emergencies, or as a basis of support for prior methods and models, but confidence in God's continual presence and activity wanes into forms of a secondary presence in support of human agency.

Jeremiah's contemporaries cited traditions (and, we would note, some scriptural texts) that interpreted this history to mean that God would perpetually sustain them in that organizational form as a royal national institution. One possible historical referent had occurred a century before these Jeremiah texts. In 701 BCE, following decades in which Israel and Samaria had fallen to Assyrian forces, Yahweh countered an Assyrian siege and saved Jerusalem, as prophesied by Isaiah. This may have reinforced a theological perspective concerning God's unwavering support of the Jerusalem-centered monarchy. Royalty and clerics functioned inside this story that predetermined how they would both read and engage their situation. But the subsequent waywardness, as noted by Jeremiah, made that experience irrelevant.¹³ This is Jeremiah's environment, a context of discontinuous change in which the usual approaches to anticipation, prediction, and royal management do not work. Change factors included not only the neo-Babylonian defeat of Assyria and the inflamed animosity between the Babylonian empire and Egypt, but also the internal disruption in Judah due to the loss of traditions, the seeming minimal presence of texts (except for the partial renewal under Josiah, see 2 Kgs 22), and the multivalent voices of prophets. The prophets that claimed God's preference for Jerusalem prevailed with court officials—insisting that God would not let Judah fall, or (perhaps) any defeat would be very temporary. So, as the Babylonian military power succeeded in a series of forays, captured citizens and the urban elites, and threatened further destruction, Judah's leaders at first said the threat would dissipate, then when survival appeared unlikely they sought the protection of Egypt. They were formed inside a narrative that privileged the means of power and control rather than the deeper story of God's agency in covenant.¹⁴

All of these elements are noted in the book of Jeremiah. He interprets the situation: leaders and people have deserted traditions, lived and worshiped wrongly, and ignored the warnings of prophets sent by God. God's

13. Robert Hubbard, email message to Mark Lau Branson, March 4, 2020.

14. See Oded, "Judah and the Exile."

words name the depth of the challenge: “Today I have made you [Jeremiah] an armed city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall against the entire land—the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and all its people” (1:18). Then, as their anger becomes fixated on the truthful messenger, and Jeremiah is blamed and persecuted, he laments, “I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter” (11:19 NRSV).¹⁵ Jeremiah is leading by disrupting the party line in Jerusalem; he is questioning the basis of their actions, the sources of their functional narratives. His voice, for some, gains credence because he bears the anger of waning officials. He has the ears of a few contacts, who diffuse his words in a dangerous situation. He is interpreting the current situation, their Jewish heritage, and God’s present actions. Even though this interpretive leadership does not achieve the surrender or transformation of imagination he calls for, and efforts for a military alliance with Egypt proceed, Jeremiah’s words create new opportunities in Babylon among the exiles, and his collected utterances shape a profound reorientation for Israel during and after the Babylonian exile.

Walter Brueggemann emphasizes the point that without proper utterance, Israel loses its identity, and its existence is threatened.¹⁶ There are utterances from the palace, but they fail to adequately connect with historical texts and what God is doing on the ground. They fear being colonized by Babylon but in fact they already live as a colony that does not attend to God. This is the background to the kind of interpretive leadership Jeremiah is using to show the people what is actually going on. Their forgetfulness must be named. Another kind of utterance is required. They need leaders who stand in the space between the texts that rightly name their heritage, the threats of the world, their wayward rulers, and the on-the-ground provisions of an active and engaged God. If, in the midst of Israel’s choices, any aspect of this utterance is lost, then identity and agency are endangered. Jeremiah’s generation failed to give an accurate account of Yahweh’s life with them, and that failure, as Brueggemann writes, “leads to a sense of autonomy, a life without Yahweh.”¹⁷ Without true utterances, with only the palace-sanctioned interpretations, God’s saving words were neither recognized nor welcomed, so Israel attended to “things that do not profit” (2:8 NRSV). If an interpretive community¹⁸ is to find a generative future, then, with its plural leaders, that

15. Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky attend to this kind of blaming in *Leadership On the Line*, but we doubt if reading that book would have done much for Jeremiah. See page 41.

16. Brueggemann, *Texts That Linger*, 2.

17. Brueggemann, *Texts that Linger*, 3.

18. This concept of a community of interpreters comes from Royce, *Problem of Christianity*, 262. Concerning “communities of memory,” see Bellah et al., *Habits of the*

community needs to recall and recite stories, meditate on and discern the presence and priorities of God in the narratives, and then test the discovered meanings in their current context. This iterative cycle of hearing and responding, of reflection and action (which we will address later), has the potential for showing the way out of the traps they have set for themselves.

Like Judah's rulers as they scramble to fix their chaos, Euro-tribal churches have developed habits and practices around institutional behaviors aimed at perpetuating organizational viability. Jeremiah utters a call to forget the structures and to reform around testimony and witness and practices regarding God's present activities. Jeremiah's work pushes us by naming our agnosticism. We value and quote elements of our traditions and texts as we write unending new texts to integrate our challenges and beliefs into mission statements and strategic plans. But, like the royal efforts seeking alliance with Egypt, Euro-tribal churches tend to over-invest in an imagination that had already excluded God's agency.

What we see here is Jeremiah practicing what we call interpretive leadership. It is about waking up and taking the risk of listening. Interpretive leaders do not begin by proclaiming—they attend to God's voice and the voices of those around them. Anyone around Jeremiah could have said "We're in trouble; this isn't working well." But since God said he would provide words and new life, the obvious destruction was not self-interpreting. There are parallels here with the late modern disequilibrium among North American churches. While numerous efforts for fixing the church are the topic of training, reading, planning, and management, our own observations indicate that God is at work outside of these efforts. So interpretive leaders help communities of believers to ask: What is God doing? How is the Spirit at work in this place, among these people? What observations, traditions, voices, and texts might increase our capacities for discerning God's initiatives? What habits block this engagement?

This is interpretive leadership, and Jeremiah is about this difficult task, made especially challenging because office holders not only counter his claims but also have capacities for coercion and retribution. However, as the longer story unfolds, Jeremiah's interpretive work eventually gains traction.¹⁹

Heart, 153–54. This framework is parallel to that of a "learning community," which gets more attention in our work on Matthew.

19. We will attend further to Jeremiah regarding interpretive leadership and discontinuous change in chapter 4.

MATTHEW

We will assume that Matthew wrote in the late seventies or early eighties. While some recent commentators propose that he lived and worked in Galilean cities like Sepphoris or Tiberius, we agree with a substantial number of Bible scholars that Matthew was resident in Antioch, Syria and he was writing with an awareness of the Christian community in that city.²⁰ Antioch was the third largest city of the Roman Empire, likely with over 200,000 residents, and shaped by the presence of Roman government, systems, trade, and military forces. Also, Antioch had long been a residence for the Jewish diaspora. This diverse population was formed by both local and larger factors. Over the centuries, Jews had lived there, sometimes in favored, wealthy circumstances, but often at the same time some Jews were impoverished—and on occasion persecuted. And, as in other locations, synagogues had been incorporating Gentiles—and that had increased in the decades of the Jesus movement. By the time of Matthew's writing, Christians had, for several decades, been living into and shaping their own core narratives, practices, and beliefs in this city. The ongoing connections between Christ-followers and Jews was occurring in both synagogues and in church gatherings.²¹

The more immediate circumstances, probably the topic of frequent conversations, concerned Rome's recent military conquest of Jerusalem. Regional Roman leaders had been frustrated by Jewish uprisings, and in the late sixties, after Roman troops centered in Antioch had failed to quell those rebellions, Titus led additional Roman troops in the sacking of Jerusalem and the Temple. This was not only a matter of human trauma, with a significant loss of life and thousands fleeing, but it was also a theological crisis—what was God's role in this event?

Matthew knows that earlier Jewish immigrants had received a certain favor through citizenship,²² while more recent arrivals were marginalized by

20. This focus on Antioch does not discount that Matthew had a wider audience in view but it does help us connect his writing with a real on-the-ground context, including the belief that God was continuing to be an active agent of the gospel.

21. "The Jewish character of the Jesus movement remained strong. As late as the 380s CE, figures like Chrysostom were berating Christians in Antioch for going to synagogues on Saturdays and churches on Sundays and generally refusing to choose one form of association over the other. This indicates that a large number of people, in the third largest city of the empire, understood following Jesus as not only compatible with Jewish/synagogue life but inseparable from it." Tommy Givens, personal correspondence, April 16, 2020.

22. Adams et al., *Social and Economic Life*, 161.

imperial Rome and urban stratification.²³ Rome's hegemonic power is visible in the trade route that connects Antioch with the eastern regions of the empire and in the presence of military might (especially with Titus's legions in the area). Many refugees mourn as they flee Rome's victory in Jerusalem. Fear and anxiety would be present in Antioch's synagogues as they absorb the losses in Judea.

This is an environment in which the church is experiencing disorientation. Many Jewish Christ followers had experienced decades of rejection and even violence from their families and synagogues. Also, there were ongoing tensions regarding how Gentiles fit into the life of churches and the wider Jewish community. The Christian faith had been defined as a Jewish faith—and now the historic geographic center of that faith had been destroyed. In addition to the local challenges at the intersection of religious, economic, and political forces in an urban center under Roman rule, the Antioch church always suffered the overflow of suffering in Palestine—whether famine or persecution or war. If Jesus had proclaimed the presence of God's kingdom, and that his power would be revealed in God's apocalypse and the fall of the temple (Matt 24–25), how were they to interpret these events? How was God engaged with the empire? With Israel? Churches in North America are also in a complex time of immigration, ethnic and cultural disequilibrium, confusion about how to relate to an empire, ongoing (and new) wars, and the loss of narratives that previously provided (for some) assurances about identity and expectations. These disruptions are often met with management strategies and delimited modes of engagement. Our proposal, that God is active and creative in our contexts, requires *learning communities* that engage new ways of attending and improvising.

Matthew is shaping a community that needs to have a new awareness along with alternative practices and priorities, so he addresses their questions by directing their attention to a carefully crafted narrative. In this narrative he recalls words and actions of Jesus, and places those stories into the context of Rome's occupation of Palestine. In doing this he is inviting them to see what may otherwise be invisible. For example, after several opening chapters with a genealogy and stories about Jesus' birth, baptism, temptation, and early ministry, Matthew invites his readers to hear Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as co-listeners with the original audience. In that earlier context of Rome's military occupation, marginal economics, and what could be called mixed reviews of Jerusalem's leaders, some hearers were simply, humbly waiting with hope for God's future. And there were

23. The social and economic strata are also noted by others: Brown and Meier, *Antioch and Rome*, 30–32; Carter, *Matthew and Empire*, 47; Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 17–19.

others (including those who came to be identified as Zealots) who were provoking rulers in hopes of an uprising. Jesus disrupts the experiences of those who gather to hear him and he names God's initiative: those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, and who are meek, are explicitly blessed because God is involved (Matt 5:3–5). That word—*blessed*—is not a matter of sappy internal attitudes but a powerful description about God's invasive actions. The kingdom from heaven transforms material conditions and social relationships, including the distribution of power. But for hearers, these sentences seem counterintuitive. Those who are marginalized and without options are favored by God's current initiative. If Jesus' disciples and Matthew's readers are going to gain capacities to understand what Jesus is up to, this reframing of how to interpret what is happening is critical. They need to be awakened to God's agency which, Jesus teaches, empowers their own agency. If we miss this reframing of what God is doing in Jesus then we are bound to misunderstand all that Matthew writes. Part of Matthew's purpose in writing is to invite these anxious Christians in Antioch to learn new perspectives on what is happening through an engagement with their own central Christian story.

To Jesus' audience, Rome said, "Enter into Roman life as it is presented by the collaborating Sanhedrin (official Jewish leadership) and Herod's dynasty (representing Rome). In this manner you will receive mercy, you can stay on the land, and you can be comforted and filled. Your reward can be now; you can avoid persecution; you can enter the kingdom of Rome." This is the *pax Romana*—the peace made available by a generous and benevolent empire and managed by Jewish elites. These words would shape a people in particular ways. The language indicated coherence between current arrangements and what some claimed that God was offering. This interpretive work of the Jewish elites (and how they used their power) was often the center of conflict between Jesus and those authorities as he contested their interpretation of the law. Not everyone lived at ease in this construction. Matthew's church in Antioch received the same message—compliance with Rome was the only obvious option. Rome is the only power, the only agent, the only provider of peace. This web—empire, religion, elites, sanctioned interpretations—is not dissimilar to North American societies and struggles regarding power and resources and who defines the good life.

Matthew's readers could consider Jesus' audience as they reflected on their own situation. In other words, Matthew's intention was to assist these Antiochian Christians to become more alert and faithful as they listen in on how Jesus addressed his own contemporaries. They hear how Jesus was forming them, especially his disciples, into a community that was learning to see God's story from a radically different place than that of established

elites. Jesus' hearers were not quite sold on the Rome-Jerusalem arrangements. Economics had been unpredictable because of globalization: Rome had worked toward commodification in the Galilee fishing industry, and family farms were being merged into larger operations—necessary steps for supporting Rome's economy and its troops. And, though they couldn't say it too publicly, these listeners did not have confidence in many of the Jewish priests who were under Rome authority and generally compliant.²⁴ They knew the economic dislocations of that day; they knew that many were losing out to the Roman style of globalization. Many struggled with the temple compromises. They knew that some had spoken out and that some had even taken up arms in rebellion. Many prayed for a messiah. They meditated on the Psalms and Isaiah and Jeremiah, and sometimes on the Maccabean narrative. Now, in Antioch, Matthew's church knows that Rome's power seemed ubiquitous and those Jerusalem leaders, who had recently revolted, had suffered and died in the midst of Titus's violent overthrow. In what was a homeland for many of them, Israel was reduced to rubble. Matthew wanted the Antioch church to learn of God's purposes through all of this. So he invited them to read Jesus' words: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matt 5:3–5 NRSV).

Now, upon hearing these words from Jesus, what can the Palestinian villagers see? What does the Antioch church see? What access to reality do they now have that they did not have until Jesus' words are uttered? To these who are mourning, who feel powerless, who know they can't go up against Rome, Jesus announces another reality: those in mourning will receive comfort from God. This mourning is appropriate, and lamentations are appropriate, because the situation calls for personal and corporate sadness. But it doesn't end there, because God is involved: Jesus proclaims, "You will be comforted." Something more is going on.

Those villagers in Palestine and now the urban dwellers in Antioch were expecting a new kingdom with Jesus, though there were differing ideas concerning what that was. But now they experienced only loss. Then they hear Jesus say, "The meek will inherit the earth." Whether those original hearers were subsistence farmers or Jerusalem insiders, the Beatitudes were earthshaking because they spoke a world that could not otherwise be imagined. And now the Antioch readers hear of a reality that meets them in their dislocation and pain. Matthew is forwarding Jesus' message: God is present and active, so learn to be awakened to what has been beyond your vision.

24. Fletcher-Louis, "Priest, Priesthood," 700.

Commentators and preachers have often mistaken the Beatitudes for commands, or written them off as idealistic and naive, or relegated them to matters of internal disposition.²⁵ But they are actually something quite different—a lesson in communal sense-making. With this proclamation, which was foreshadowed in the law and the prophets, God's agency becomes clearer. As the crowd is hearing it, Jesus is providing renewed access, an access sharpened and empowered in the proclamation. In the language exchange, reality changes. In the proclamation, centered in the presence of Jesus, there is a reality that had not previously existed. A group of people—this circle of learners—is now different, and they become named players, agents of an incipient interpretive community.

Instead of “blessed are those who accommodate and acquire,” Jesus says that God's blessing surrounds the poor and the meek, and that he incorporates them into something new. Rather than living as if Sanhedrin management and Roman globalization provide the truth, they now have an option. God's generative presence is available to those who mourn, who are meek, who are persecuted, and,

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. (5:6–9, NRSV)

Because of the coming of the reign of God in the presence of Jesus, there is a reality that is beyond the existing perceptions and interpretive capacities of the listeners. So Jesus begins by describing reality—a reality that the listeners and readers might too easily miss. In addressing the disciples (5:1–2), Jesus' discourse inaugurates this new learning community. The relationship between those shaped by Jesus and those shaped exclusively by other cultural forces is not merely a matter of values or doctrines. It is about life with God who knows reality and who engages that reality, shaping a community in which these blessings are announced and the community is transformed. This marks an invitation to be learning communities who engage what is being announced.

The churches of North America also exist in the complexities of diverse contexts. They inhabit cultural imaginations that limit sight and misalign practices. Even with theological confessions about God, Euro-tribal

25. For a helpful overview of interpretation, see Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 229–31.

churches may speak of God's activities but frequently speak and plan and work quite independently of what Jesus announced in the Beatitudes. God may be addressed to bless or provide or resources, but activities proceed according to habits. Also, while previous decades and centuries gave preference to a European-framed religion regarding holy days, civic prayers, and faith claims of public officials, those social behaviors are less frequent or profoundly misshaped in our time, so that these experiences lead to reactive stances, blame, and a scramble for fixes. Some participants are negotiating matters of economics and social power with a level of satisfaction; some are wounded or even outraged by inequities and oppression. Continuing human migrations within North American and immigration across borders cause disorientation when newcomers in church neighborhoods fail to fit the cultural preferences of those churches. All of the cultural behaviors of seeking comfort or preferences or power or certainty or leverage are constantly at play. Matthew provides us with another perspective—learn to see what God sees, to discern what God is doing, to receive and engage God's initiatives. The Beatitudes are featured in the jarring beginning of Matthew's Gospel and they frame and interpret everything that follows.²⁶

LUKE'S ACCOUNT IN ACTS

Why would Luke, writing in Acts about the numerous, amazing, noteworthy events in the early decades of the diffusion of the gospel, repeat one story multiple times? For example, Luke gives us details about a vision Peter had, noting that Peter had the vision three times. Then, later, he tells us that Peter referred to the vision for the benefit of others. Then he has Peter provide details of the vision, this time to other apostles. Luke is even more repetitious with a vision that Cornelius had. First, Luke narrates the details of Cornelius's vision, then the next day we read an account as Cornelius himself tells Peter about the vision. When Peter joins a group of Cornelius's associates at Cornelius's home, Cornelius recounts his vision. Finally, Peter gives an account of Cornelius's vision when he meets with other apostles in Jerusalem. In a book that seeks to provide the church with an account of numerous events, these two visions get an inordinate word count. Does this just indicate sloppy editing on the part of the publisher?

Writing around 80 CE, Luke is aware of the mood present among the churches of the Mediterranean world. Because of his travels, and the communications available among churches and traveling teams, Luke knew of

26. Our work regarding the Gospel of Matthew, with attention to theories about learning communities and social construction, will be the focus of chapter 5.

the local persecutions in various towns, the violent overthrow of Jerusalem by Titus and his father Vespasian (that also affected Palestinian Christians), and the traumas in Rome. Gaius Tacitus, a senator and historian wrote:

Nero set up as culprits and punished with the utmost refinement of cruelty a class hated for their abominations, who are commonly called Christians. Nero's scapegoats [the Christians] were the perfect choice because it temporarily relieved pressure of the various rumors going around Rome. Christus, from whom their name is derived, was executed at the hands of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius. Checked for a moment, this pernicious superstition again broke out, not only in Judea, the source of the evil, but even in Rome . . .²⁷

In discussing Gaius's writings, John Knox notes that, "members of the Early Christian movement often became political targets and scapegoats for the social ills and political tensions of specific rulers and turbulent periods during the first three centuries, CE; however, this persecution was sporadic and rarely Empire-wide, but it was devastating, nonetheless."²⁸

This ongoing suffering did not seem to match Jesus' promise of a new reign of God. Jesus himself had promised his own personal return. He had made clear that the gospel was neither just some inward disposition nor a cult disconnected from on-the-ground realities. Salvation included matters of money, relationships, health, households, labor, and food. Decade after decade, participants and observers would question the vitality and power of a movement that seemed to consistently lack traction. Since Christians faced famine in Palestine, experienced treachery in the gladiator games in Rome, and were persecuted across the empire by their closest religious cousins the Jews, we might wonder if many were confused and discouraged. This is why Luke writes—to provide the stories, interpretive links, and hopes that centered on God's continuing initiatives. Our exploration of Acts will benefit from three lenses—diffusion (how something spreads among cultures and societies), alterity (experiences with those who are *other*), and improvisation (the process of receiving some experience, drawing on our own heritage and personal history, then responding so as to move the experience forward). Luke's narrative demonstrates how improvisation is always rooted in what has been received—especially the resources of Israel and experiences that Peter and others had in following Jesus.²⁹

27. Gaius Tacitus, quoted in Knox, "Christianity," para. 15.

28. Knox, "Christianity," para. 12.

29. Joel Green notes that the main work of the disciples in Luke's first volume was to be "with" him—which was a prerequisite for apostolic witness in Acts (1:21) and,

Kavin Rowe writes about how the Lukan narrative in Acts “is a highly charged and theologically sophisticated political document that aims at nothing less than the construction of an alternative total way of life . . . that runs counter to the life-patterns of the Graeco-Roman world.”³⁰ In reference to Luke 17:6, “the Christian mission is, in Luke’s way of reading reality, a witness to a world that is upside down.”³¹ There is a play on perspectives—the accusers claim that Christians are turning the world upside down but actually the Christians are speaking and living in a way that reveals that the world is already upside down; in fact, God, with the participation of the church, is creating “instantiations of a world turned right side up.”³² Luke is aware that churches need these narratives in order to not succumb to the cultural powers and patterns. Rowe emphasizes that Luke is providing a full-on counter to Roman culture but not a prompt for a challenge to the military state. At the center of the project is the apocalypse—a continual revealing—of God.³³

Volume one of Luke’s writing is the longest Gospel narrative—a remarkably crafted account of Jesus’ life and teachings, along with numerous insights into varied responses and consequences. Now, in volume two, Luke addresses the diffusion of the gospel across the Graeco-Roman world. But he is careful to not rush the geographic spread; he walks attentively through the initial critical turns of the story. Later we will engage several other episodes in Acts,³⁴ but this introduction focuses on chapters ten and eleven, where the above noted visions get an apparently inordinate amount of attention.

Luke’s repetition of the testimonies of Cornelius and Peter makes clear that God is the initiator. Cornelius, an Italian, a centurion, a devout and generous God-fearer, saw an angel and was told that his prayers and alms (perpetual ways of being in a relationship with God) have made him available to something new that God is doing. He is instructed to send a team to Joppa to get Simon (Peter). Obviously, we are inside a narrative that disrupts its readers; if we believe even this initial setup, God is using a soldier who is part of Rome’s military occupation and this soldier lives inside traditional

relevant to this study, the necessary preparation for faithful improvisation. We believe that the same practice of being with Jesus is the mode for our emphasis on being with God as God engages our contexts. See Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, 108–9.

30. Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 4.

31. Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 6.

32. Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 6.

33. Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 5.

34. Our further work with Acts, including attention to matters of diffusion, alterity, and improvisation, comprises chapter 6.

practices of Jewish faith. Seemingly without any hesitation Cornelius does just what he is told, “Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter” (10:5 NRSV). As the story unfolds, Luke recounts this vision three times.

Next, Luke describes a disruptive afternoon in Joppa where Peter’s rooftop prayers draw him into a trance. In a vision he sees numerous animals and hears instructions to eat. When he argues, the voice, now credited to God, tells him, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (10:15 NRSV). Then, probably to limit Peter’s avoidance, the vision is repeated two more times. Not only is God repetitious with Peter but Luke’s narrative includes a reference back to this story plus a complete retelling.

Evidently Luke wants readers to be aware of some key matters: God is the initiator, prayer is a practice that places us in a listening posture, and those who are faithful in prayer will begin to improvise based on what they have heard. By *improvise* we mean that they take what has been given to them in a new experience, or situation, combine it with existing resources and competencies, and then take the next steps. The diffusion of the gospel was never a matter of strategic plans or expert tacticians. Cornelius, working with his own habits and resources, improvises when he hears instructions—he chooses a team to send and he gathers a group to receive a visit from Peter, a step that was not in the instructions. We will soon read that one act of his improvisation gets quickly corrected—when he prostrates himself to Peter he is told to stand.

In the world of the eighties, as churches experienced disorientation and numerous disruptions, we can imagine that they experienced increased anxieties, fears, and hopelessness. In this context, Luke insists that his readers attend to God’s present and ongoing activities. While Jewish and Roman traditions are still at play, while numerous forces of Mediterranean cultures shape peoples and cities, God is a persistent initiator. Further, Luke notes, if God is the initiator then there are important, specific practices that make us more available to discern those activities, and we then have the work of improvising into God’s creative engagements.

Given those basics, Luke names the jarring new orientation that God is promoting: God’s particular enlistment of Israel has been expanded. Peter had already been stretched when he visited Samaria after Philip’s expulsion from Jerusalem created new opportunities among that previously shunned people (8:4–25).³⁵ Through Acts 8 and 9, Luke is showing us a consistent

35. Johnson notes that Luke’s narration of Peter’s visit to Lydda and Joppa (Acts 9:31–43) and the miraculous healings creates a transition toward the explicit engagement with Cornelius and other Gentiles. Luke specifies that Peter responds to messengers, that the Holy Spirit is preparing and shaping these experiences, that Peter tells

progression as Peter is stretched. Biblical narratives indicate Peter as both faithful *and* hesitant (a hesitancy that does not get fully overcome even with this episode). Throughout this story, Peter argues with the angel, is “bewildered,” “broods,” and is “astonished.” It will take the word of Cornelius, an outsider to pious Jews, for Peter to get enough sight to exclaim “Jesus is Lord of all” (10:36). God uses a thrice-repeated vision to tell him that exclusionary practices needed to be dropped, and then God instructs him to go with a group of men who are at his gate. That’s it—Peter does not receive clarifying reasons or goals or methods or scripts. Peter does begin to ask questions of the men, and to listen to their answers. They implicate Cornelius, providing strong reference regarding his character and his service of Israel, and they claim that an angel prompted the journey to fetch Peter. Peter improvises by doing two things that are not specified by either vision—he provides a night’s hospitality and then gathers a few believers to join him in this rather ambiguous adventure. Improvisation assumes disruptions and requires listening, in this case to God and to visitors, and it always includes elements and actions that are already at hand. It is our conviction that, similar to the disruption that Peter faced, North American churches today have opportunities to become aware of and participate in how God is active among our neighbors. Without the humility to listen, to God and to others, we cannot gain this awareness. Without improvisational steps toward neighbors (without scripts and answers) we will be without awareness or means of joining God. Luke writes in order to reform our expectations and options.

When this merged traveling group arrives in Caesarea, and after correcting Cornelius’s posture, Peter discovers the assembly that has been gathered. He says only enough to address the awkwardness that everyone feels, emphasizing his own willingness to move beyond customary prejudicial behaviors: “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (10:28 NRSV). Then he says he wants to listen. Cornelius recounts his vision (this is Luke’s third telling), commends Peter for his kindness, and requests whatever message God has sent via Peter. Peter begins with a key theological claim that arises because of the situation in which he finds himself: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (10:34–5 NRSV). Acting on habits developed previously, he gives testimony regarding Jesus, invites them to believe, and is then interrupted by the Holy Spirit. Peter and the Jewish believers who are with him

the stricken to “get up” (using a term connected to Jesus’ resurrection), and that Peter is in the home of a tanner (whose labors were seen as unclean). Johnson, *Acts*, 179–80.

hear the Spirit-prompted tongues and testimonies. Again, God is initiating and everyone else is improvising. For example, in response to what happened (“these people . . . have received the Holy Spirit just as we have” 10:47 NRSV) Peter improvises by calling for the new believers to be baptized.

As word of this event spread, Peter faced criticism; he was accused of being in an unclean house and receiving the hospitality of table fellowship among those who were uncircumcised.³⁶ In Jerusalem, facing critics, Peter blames God; the apostles receive a full telling of both visions, the steps that Cornelius and Peter took, and the Holy Spirit’s baptism. As Luke Timothy Johnson writes,

Luke shows through the narrative itself how the diverse experiences of God’s action by individuals are slowly raised to the level of a communal narrative, which in turn must be tested by the entire community in a difficult and delicate process of disagreement, debate, and the discernment of the Scripture. By means of carefully constructed narrative, Luke communicates a vision of the Church as a community of moral discourse and of discernment of the Spirit.³⁷

Possibly most disorienting here and in our later explorations in Acts 16 is the Spirit’s engagement in households in a manner that displaces both Jerusalem and Rome. Luke’s earlier narrative has seen the temple as a defining, sacred center. Now, in Peter’s arguments with God on a Joppa rooftop, and then as he is schooled in a Caesarean house, there is a disruption. Green writes about the two axes of the temple, “The vertical axis marks the temple as the meeting place of God and humanity . . . (and the) horizontal axis, then, signals how the temple establishes the order of the world.”³⁸ Both axes get reoriented in the Joppa and Caesarea houses—God’s Spirit is present and active. Green concludes that “we should notice how the house(hold) has become the substitute for the temple as a place of prayer, a place of divine revelation, a place of instruction, and even as the locus of God’s presence.”³⁹

For Luke’s readers, who are experiencing rejection in many synagogues and sporadic violent persecution from Rome, these accounts bear witness to God’s active involvement in their world and call them to practices of attentiveness, listening, and improvisation. Luke does not deny the traumas and

36. It is noticeable that the critique is not regarding a Gentile mission but about table fellowship. Maybe this can help us transgress in the ways that focus on God’s agency.

37. Johnson, *Acts of the Apostles*, 16.

38. Green, *Luke as Narrative Theologian*, 174.

39. Green, *Luke as Narrative Theologian*, 176.

challenges, but he knows how disorientation and discouragement become overwhelming if believers lose sight of God's involvement and fail to engage their own agency. Basically, Luke is reminding them that they don't need prescribed strategies or experts of innovative programs. This is emphasized by Johnson, "by this repeated telling, Luke's reader is at least assured that the one guiding the community through this treacherous passage is God's Spirit."⁴⁰

Churches in North America frequently work at managing strained commitments—professional clergy shaped by both priestly traditions and modern corporations, doctrines held with enlightenment certainty, misology rooted in colonial hegemony and a continuing objectifying of the other. While it is important for leaders to be looking at both traditional texts and practices while also attending to contemporary cultures and resources, if God's agency is not primary then actions and habits will meander in an agnostic haze. Skills for reasoning, communication, innovation, and collaboration are important but usually they are operating with blinders. Throughout volume two of his writing, Luke provides numerous accounts of God's initiatives and the generative practices that have made alertness and responsiveness possible in regard to the churches' gospel vocation. We are also learning that without alterity—without the words of those we consider outsiders—we will not see and engage with God. Peter realizes and gives witness that "(Jesus) is Lord of all!"—not because some doctrines are rightly affirmed but because he listens to Cornelius and sees that God is active.⁴¹ Now we are invited to connect the narratives of Scripture with our own lives. We believe that alertness to God's agency, risk, and humility in engaging others, practices of theological discernment, and a praxis of improvisation can help leaders find a space in which their work embodies a similar hope. We will explore these further in chapter 6 and in our proposals in *Intermezzo 2* and the chapters that follow.

EPHESIANS

Paul made a brief visit to Ephesus around 52 CE, leaving Priscilla and Aquila behind to continue the work (Acts 18). Then in 54 CE he returned and spent three years there. Luke's narrative describes or alludes to the diverse forces that worked against the gospel in Ephesus, including Jews who made

40. Johnson, *Acts of the Apostles*, 201.

41. As Green notes, "For good reason, study of the Cornelius episode has, in recent years, shied away from a narrow focus on Cornelius's conversion in favor of an emphasis on Peter's." Green, *Luke as Narrative Theologian*, 175.

it impossible for Paul to teach in the synagogue, a Jewish exorcist who falsely claimed that he was working with Paul, and a silversmith who started a riot among silver craftsmen who were losing money because of Paul's work (which challenged their Artemis-centered idol-making). The church grew in size and maturity in this environment of challenges that included religions, money, labor/business, and a town clerk's actions to maintain *Pax Romana*. About five years later, while under arrest in Rome, Paul wrote a letter that, in some early copies, has "to the Ephesians" in the heading; some other copies lack any specified addressee. Sometimes this letter is evaluated as too impersonal and too decontextual to be Paul's, but others note that the time lag (since he last visited) and geographic distance could contribute to those characteristics. There is still much that can be discerned in regard to Paul's actions as a leader and what he commended going forward. While actual authorship has been debated, we will refer to Paul because of both tradition and the conceptual congruence with Paul's other New Testament letters.⁴²

Paul himself does not seem to be in a situation that demonstrates to the Ephesians that all is well. Again, he is in prison in Rome, surrounded by the empire's symbols, activities, and personnel. While there were mitigating circumstances (living with a single guard and with some level of freedom), this was likely during Nero's reign and the empire featured both instability and violence. Many Christians saw Nero as the anti-Christ, and the great fire of 64 CE (after Paul's acquittal and departure) was blamed on them. Ephesus was a major Roman city, important for trade, philosophy, and worship of Artemis (with the impressive temple nearby, which was under Ephesus's stewardship). So Paul is writing from the empire's capital to a major regional center.

In the letter's prologue Paul situates his readers vis-à-vis their world. The citizens of Ephesus would have seen themselves under the fatherhood of Caesar, proud recipients and guardians of Artemis's temple, benefactors of great teachers, and recognized as a powerful outpost of the empire's economics and military. The Ephesians knew their role, and understood their obligations to show their allegiance to Rome and Artemis, which are the sources of identity, belonging, gifts, and purpose. Paul, in his earlier ministry and now in this letter, counters with an alternative narrative. In this socio-cultural context, they need to be awake to what God has done and is doing.

This first chapter of Ephesians orients us to the source and types of blessings that Paul commends, and here we are faced with a conceptual

42. For an overview of authorship and audience, see Arnold, "Ephesians, Letter to."

challenge. The opening paragraphs have a word that has become increasingly unhelpful in late modernity—*spiritual*. It tends to refer to some unspecified postures or forces or activities that are disconnected from the earth. Spirituality is an altered state of existence, non-physical, ethereal, without substance. But for Paul, the word is actually more about the deeper, richer, substantive, even earthy connections to God, rather than something intangible and insubstantial.⁴³ Our modern imaginations are equally derailed by the words *heavenly* and *heavens*. Creative literature and bad theology have moved heaven away from physical presence and current chronology. In Ephesians, Paul assumes that both words are landed, present, tangible—because he is challenging both Artemis and Rome in real time and in specified geographies. Without this conceptual clarity, Christian faith is by definition irrelevant and without substance. As we will explain in the next chapter, modernity made that shift and God's agency was sidelined. In the most basic way, *spiritual* is, for Christ-followers, the real, daily, communal connections between God, the world, and the church. So, as becomes clearer below, the work of spirituality is to discern and participate in what God is doing in a locale and during this time. And, to take another quick dip into Ephesians 2, the “heavenly places” are the *current* location of the Ephesian believers (2:6 NRSV), meaning these believers are situated in the midst of the lively spiritual resources and traffic that come with participation in the Trinity on the ground, in daily life, without leaving their current geographic location. Without these conceptual shifts, Ephesians is flattened and agnostic.

So how does Paul work to orient them to this spiritual-heavenly-grounded-blessed life? First, he reminds them that even though the mysteries of Artemis seemed permeating, powerful, and invasive, with secrets and rituals and hidden knowledge, *God is not keeping secrets*: “With all wisdom and insight God has made known to us the mystery of God's will, according to God's good pleasure that God set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (1:9–10 NRSV, adapted). In Christ, mysteries are not about things hidden and proscribed, but about what God has already made, and continues to make, abundantly clear and tangible and consequential. What God has revealed is not just a postponed goal that calls on believers to major in delayed gratification, but blessings have already been distributed and, even as Paul writes, continue to flow into their streets, homes, neighborhoods, relationships, troubles, labors, learning, and imaginations. While only in “the fullness of time” will God's full design become realized and visible, Paul writes that God's telos for creation has invaded Ephesus. Second, God's

43. See Barth, *Ephesians 1–3*, 101–3.

glory—which is not ethereal and ceremonial but God's grounded and tangible self revelation—is the source of their vocation: “We are called to be an honor to God's glory” (1:12). That word *honor* is about how our lives and words, our thinking and acting, are an applause that arises from what God is doing around us (God's glory)—which requires that we pay attention, discern, so that we can live into our vocation. As we will see,⁴⁴ this is what leadership is about—making connections among the continually new movements of the Spirit and the women and men who are available and engaged in discernment and faithful participation.⁴⁵

INHABITING WORLDS

We all see and think and feel and act inside cultural imaginaries. These maps or patterns are absorbed into our social ways of life as we continually learn ways of perceiving, imagining, acting, or evaluating. Just as Jeremiah and Matthew and Luke and Paul were shaped by their cultures, and enabled by the Holy Spirit to see something somewhat differently than their contemporaries, they provided those ways of interpreting and acting inside the frameworks of the very contexts in which they lived. Their books are not generic or timeless. As readers of Scripture, we also bring with us our societal habits—about spirituality and church and leadership and love and practice.

As leaders, continuing the metaphor of waking up, we are promoting a new alertness to how we read cultural forces, to how we embody societal habits of leadership, and to how we enter into biblical and theological texts. We believe that the apocalypse of God, throughout history and focused in Jesus Christ, and continuing in the ongoing presence and actions of the Trinity, must be the center of this exploration. These Bible books (and others) are crafted to help readers perceive and act in ways that are different from—even in direct counter to—the accepted ways of seeing and acting. Our vocation is to discern and be shaped by God's “breaking into” the grounded realities of our contexts. So we will name what we see in contemporary

44. In chapter 7 we will engage Ephesians with attention to modern leadership frameworks, including critical theory and various elements of organizational change.

45. This process makes obvious that interpretive leadership as utterance is essential but incomplete; rather, meanings arise from activities as words are enacted, and the experiences reshape the words. We create knowledge, we really learn, in this iterative process of personal and corporate praxis, which is the cumulative, mutually correcting, and reinforcing cycle of study/reflection and engagement/action. One place to begin such testing of utterance is the repeated list of basic practices connected to God and neighbor: hospitality, witness, love expressed in deeds, attention to orphans, foreigners, and the poor.

practices of leadership, then by engaging theology and Scripture we will begin describing alternatives. We are not promoting new techniques, and frequently we will commend some currently available frameworks that we believe are malleable, but our core affirmation is—to parallel Kavin Rowe's affirmation—that God engages a world that has been turned upside down and we need our own lenses to be flipped or we miss what God is doing and thereby we lose opportunities to participate in turning it right-side up. We are continually encouraged when we see leaders step into the practices that make discernment and participation more likely. We are also convinced that the biblical and theological resources we engage are profoundly generative for this task of seeing and practicing a different way.