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Faith in the Third Millennium: Reading Scriptures Together

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David gave his son Solomon the plan of the porch and the houses [of the Temple].... King David said to the entire assemblage: "God has chosen my son Solomon alone, an untried lad, although the work to be done is vast, for the Temple is not for a man but for the Lord God."... David said, "Blessed are You, Lord God of Israel our father from eternity to eternity." (1 Chron. 28 – 29)¹

Dear President Torrance and members of the Congregation of Princeton Seminary,

May God bless you all in this extraordinary time of inauguration.

As you hear, this occasion stimulates my Jewish Biblical imagination to reflect on the transition of leadership from David to Solomon. But before I say anything more about the Chronicles text, let me assure you that I realize that neither outgoing nor incoming president is or would be King and that this House in which we stand is neither Davidic Palace nor Solomonic Temple.

But I did, literally, turn to these Scriptural texts when I sought guidance about how to appreciate God's place in this week's events. Sharing a few words about what these and a related text mean to me on this day, I hope also to illustrate a few features of my own way of practicing the scriptural reasoning I share with David Ford and with Aref Nayed and our peers. I say "my own way of practice," because scriptural reasoning allows us to seek after God's word in our own ways, even though these ways pass through the very happy place of dialogue and warm fellowship. As long as the fellowship is strong, I have no need to worry that my way is not the same as David's or Aref's.

Well, one feature of my scriptural reasoning is *that I turn to Scripture for guidance on how to understand and act in the world.*

A second feature is that, in terms drawn from Scripture, "turning for guidance" means *lidrosh et hashem*, "inquiring after God," where the verb *lidrosh* connotes *derashah*: searching through the words of Scripture for meanings that are already there but not yet disclosed to me.

For me, *scriptural reasoning thus presumes both that God's instruction is revealed in Scripture and that what is revealed cannot be readily seen in the plain sense of the words of Scripture.*

Now, the sages of the Talmud warn, *lo yotse ... mide peshuto*, the meaning of Scripture must not depart from the plain sense, but this not a call for literalism. As I understand it, it means, “on your travels deep into Scripture, be sure to follow the path prepared for you by the grammar, the text-historical context, and the semantic fields of the plain sense. Otherwise, you will be searching after something other than the Creator's will.”

A third feature is that the plain sense speaks for all eternity, but the deeper meaning is disclosed only for the time and place of the seeker.

A fourth feature is that derashah, seeking into the depths of Scripture, is a form of prayer: it is asking God, “how shall I understand this day? And what shall I therefore do?”

A fifth feature is that the seeker believes that God answers back, as it were, and then the seeker asks a more refined question, then God answers back, and that the back and forth dialogue between prayerful seeker and the God of Scripture is what we mean by studying into the depths of Scripture as Scripture, provided we remember that this kind of study speaks only to the time and place of study.

And so my prayer for today was to ask, “how shall I understand this day” and “how shall I express my gratitude for being invited, as a Jew, to share in it, and my wonderment about what this event of sharing may mean?” This prayer moved me to read about David and Solomon. But what *is* it in the depths of the story of David and Solomon that speaks to me on this occasion? I shall limit my remarks to four lessons from the deep:

A. The first lesson is a reflection on Time and the Millennium.

What would David feel if he were present at the dedication of the House he planned? What did Solomon feel? These questions led me to think of the psalm I pray at the beginning of the Jewish morning prayer service each day and which Jewish mothers traditionally pray when they arrive in public for the first time, to name their new son or daughter:

*mizmor le chanukat ha-bayit ledavid...
aromimecha adoshem ki dilitanu v'lo samachta oyve li...*

A Davidic Song for the Dedication of the House:
I will extol you O Lord; you have raised me up and not
Allowed my enemies to triumph over me... (Ps. 30)

The initial verses of the psalm voice a sense of witnessing the time of wonders daily with us in the daily renewal of creation. This is regular time, since it happens everyday, but the psalmist reminds us that this *need not* happen every day. The miracle of creation is the miracle of

God's being with us, *we hope and pray*, again each day as the day before. This feature of the psalm thus gives voice to my joy of witnessing a moment of periodic succession, from one Seminary president to the next as from David to Solomon and, here, our prayer is that God may grant Princeton the miracle of normalcy.

To say that *God* renews each day is to speak, however, not only of a repetition, but also of a non-identical repetition: a renewal that must contain something new since it is the fruit of divine action and whatever God does will surprise us with unanticipated features. In this sense, the psalm gives voice to a sense of witnessing some new birth within this inauguration: some unanticipated way that Princeton Seminary will be a surprise to itself. (Shall I pray for surprise, or simply offer the rabbinic affirmation, *titchad'shu*: may you be refreshed in your renewal?!) Since I am not part of the everyday of the Seminary or of the Church, it will of course not be for me to see or speculate about what may in this renewal may be new.

That thought leads me to consider my own presence here and my sense of being lifted up by the invitation to share in this occasion. "I will sing to the Lord for he has lifted me up." Lovely! But then the psalmist adds, "and not allowed my enemies to triumph over me." What shall I do with this?! Because of the reference to "enemies," I almost abandoned the idea of sharing this psalm with you today: surely, succession and renewal are not about overcoming enemies! But then I remembered that the *reader* remains an inextricable part of scriptural reasoning and that the reference to triumph over enemies could have something to do with my own presence here today as a Jew inside an intimate moment in the life of the Presbyterian Church. Soon, the Psalm seemed to unveil an unexpected meaning about my life as a Jew: Perhaps, by standing here today, I am invited to taste the new life Judaism may experience when it is released from at least a portion of the still stultifying trauma of the Holocaust or *Shoah* ("utter devastation").

With all the apparent success of Jewish life in the United States, it may seem odd for you to hear me say that the Jewish people has still not recovered from the Shoah.² But I am speaking of the spiritual condition of Judaism, and I believe that the Jewish literatures and sermons of my parents' and my generations give only muted evidence of the fire of faith and vision that animates the literatures of earlier generations. And what is muted in the literatures is also muted in the pews and classrooms and homes. And when that fire is muted inside our homes, the whole world around us looks much darker and more frightening. And then the terrible and real evidence of the Shoah, retold from parent to child to child, leaves us not only marked by the unhappy truth of humanity's deep stain but also darkened by it, so that we no longer display to ourselves, let alone to the world, the creator's light that is also our mark – no, much more than a mark, it is our

inheritance, our gift, and our obligation to share: to declare each morning, “by Thy light do we see light!,” “Praised are you O Lord... Who illumines the world and its creatures with mercy... Praised are you, creator of lights.”³

After the traumas of its life in Europe, how will the people Israel refind its gift of light, share it again with the world and take its place as a light to the nations? Well, as it has done after the catastrophic losses of earlier years, the people Israel may yet have another generation or two of waiting and work until, from deep within itself and within its literatures, the creator-and-revealer’s indwelling light may shine through again, re-creating, re-ordering, and re-vivifying as it shows the world yet another face of Judaism for yet another moment of the people Israel’s relation to humanity.

None of us can predict or force the time of this rebirth. But we may be able, in the time between the times of rebirth, to pick up signs of what is to come. And, without fearing error since my error should not have the power to worsen anything, I confess to you that I believe this occasion has the appearance of such a sign: I mean this occasion on which the leader of a great seminary of the Church invites a religious Jew to share words of Torah at the time of his inauguration—and a day on which the Jew agrees....

Signs of course are seen only through the light of other signs, and I would not be able even to hallucinate such a sign as this if it had not been preceded by prior signs, proleptic signs. Such as the day, about twenty years ago, when I sat in Yale with Hans Frei, may his memory be for a great blessing, and George Lindbeck and studied with them the meaning of plain sense and learned their method of reading Scripture and heard, to my surprise, the important role of rabbinic hermeneutics in their method – in particular, as prototype for Christianity now as a “minority religion” (to echo Setri Nyomi’s words).⁴ Or the day, about twelve years ago, when I sat in Cambridge with David Ford and Daniel Hardy and studied Torah and Gospel with them and learned of their “sapiental pneumatology” – their following after God’s Spirit through its life in the churches, in the academies, in the world – and in this way I heard, again to my surprise, of the vibrant place of Jewish textual reasoning in a conversation that promised to bring Muslim, as well as Jewish and Christian scholars into close fellowship with one another. Or the days, over the past seven years, when I as a religious Jew have been welcomed beyond merit into so many wonderful conversations on scripture, theology and the world with so many Princeton Seminary scholars – among them, Clifton Black, Beverly Gaventa, George Hunsinger and many others⁵; and the day two years when I sat at the Center of Theological Inquiry with Wallace Alston, Stacy Johnson, and Robert Jenson, shared their joy in Scripture and saw scriptural reasoning emerge as a program of research at CTI.⁶ Or the days I sat in Drew University ten years ago with my student

Basit Koshul, and again in Cambridge three years ago with my colleague Aref Nayed, and studied Qur'an and Torah and discovered that we were brethren and that our texts called one to the other.

The memory of all these days enables me to read this day, today, as a sign of how Judaism may sit with its neighbors in the day that it refinds its light. In that day – and for this I pray! – Judaism will feel loved by the Church – and by the Mosque! – in a way that it has not been loved before, and Judaism will sense God's love in a way that it has not sensed it before, for this will be a love not only from the Creator who lights each day for us and from the Revealer who lights each redeeming word of Torah for us, but also from at least two congregations of the Adamic creature who, as *tselem elokim* – “image of God” – remains the subject, hope, and frustration of Israel's work in the world. Loved by Church and Mosque, Judaism may once again be granted visions of the endtime when we are all visited by the indwelling Redeemer who, marrying “image of God” – to *shem Hashem* – “the divine name” – completes the divine name in its life on earth. Enflamed again by such visions, Judaism may again take its place as a vessel of light poured out from the creator as light to the nations.

Do we stand then, now, in a new millennium? Each Sabbath, or *shabbat*, you know, (and each Holy Day and each moment of blessing during the everyday) religious Jews experience a taste of life in the world to come. But then there are six days of work, 6/7 of the world to redeem. Given the not-yet state of my people's recovery from the Shoah, I do not know that I sense a new millennium upon us. But standing here, today, I believe I taste it like a taste of a world that is yet to come. In this sense and for this moment, I sing with the Psalmist, “I will extol you (O Lord) for you have lifted me up and not let my enemies triumph over me” -- the enemies, that is, of dark memory and fear that still stalk my people and occlude and veil the light that would shine in them.

To close this longer first section, let me record a sixth feature of scriptural reasoning: *that it marks out special times for bringing a part of the eschatological future into the present.*⁷

B. The second lesson is a reflection on space: the meaning of the term “House” as referring to the *place* of kairos

If we really do taste the millennium, then where shall we say we are when we taste it, that is, when the kairos breaks in? When I say “we” in this question, I include myself Aref and David, so that I am not asking what each of us will say within the terms of our traditional doctrines but what, faithful to our separate doctrines, we may say to and with one another about that aspect of kairotic time we might co-inhabit. Our scriptural reasoning group uses the term “House” – *bayit* –

to refer to a specific tradition of worship and belief. I suggest we might also use the term to name the particular spacetime into which *kairos* breaks in.

In our first text from Chronicles, *bayit* refers both to David's Palace and to Solomon's Temple, and the ambiguity may remain in the Psalmist's title "A Davidic song for the dedication of the House." But the *Tanakh*, or Hebrew Scriptures, offers several other uses of the term *bayit* as well: a dwelling place (like the house Jacob built for himself), or a family line (like the house of Ruth), or a multigenerational community, or also a temporary stall for animals, even as temporary as a spider's web, or more generally any vessel or receptacle (like a perfume bottle); or, more abstractly, a body, a human body in particular; or, most abstractly, an adverbial construct that means "within" or "inside" or "inwards" such *mi bet leperochet*—inside (in the house of) the veil of the holy of holies (Ex 26:33).⁸

What do we learn from the many meanings of this word *bayit*?

The first lesson I learn is that individual Hebrew words of Scripture are generative not of single meanings but of broad fields of meaning and that, if we want to retrieve a single meaning from out of those fields, we cannot sit idly by the text and wait for disclosure but must bring ourselves openly to the text, declaring who and where we are and then searching actively for the meaning that seeks *us* out in this time and space. *Here we may observe an eighth feature of scriptural reasoning: that we read each word of scripture as generative of broad fields of meaning, from which we are led to encounter certain deeper meanings appropriate to this given day.*

The second lesson I learn is therefore specific to today. If today's occasion is a sign of some *kairos*, or breaking into our spacetime, then let us name the place of *kairos* simply "house," *bayit*: the dwelling, receptacle, or body into which the divine presence in its Infinity conforms itself to the finitudes of our creaturely world – the direction of the adverbial movement of the Infinite *into*, just into. And where is the *into*? Whatever receives the *kairos*: perhaps your individual bodies, the body of your president, perhaps the body of this congregation of Princeton Seminary, perhaps the transgenerational community of the Presbyterian church, perhaps just this house, or this event, the broader spacetime of a millennial change.

Here we may observe a ninth feature of scriptural reasoning: that to search for scripture's deeper meaning for this day is to pray for illumination and to search for signs of that illumination in our text traditions and in our study fellowship.

Wherever the *kairos* breaks in and is let in, let us name that place a House and let us Bless the House: *mah tovu ohalecha yacob*, "How goodly are your tents O Jacob, Your dwelling places!" (Nu. 24:5); *v'ani b'rov chasdecha avo betecha*, "Your abundant love draws me into your

House”(Ps. 5:8); *ashrei yoshvei betecha, od yehaleluha selah*, “Happy are those who dwell in your house; they shall forever praise you” (Ps. 84:5). We may then receive David’s blessing as a blessing to all those who join and guide the work of a House: “Be strong and of good courage and do it. He will not forsake you until all the work of the House of the Lord is done” (I Chron. 28:20).

C. The third lesson is a reflection on the dedication of spacetime: that a House is dedicated to *prayerful education*.

If we allow “House” to refer to a place of kairotic breaking in, then what would it mean to speak of “dedicating the house,” *chanukat habayit*? Is the kairos not itself a dedication?

I begin again with reflections on a Hebrew root word, in this case *chanakh*, “to dedicate,” and once again you are about to hear a broad field of meanings.

The word appears most often in the way we have used it: *chanakh* as dedicating a new house⁹ or also dedicating God’s House, the Temple, in which case the act of dedicating is also named an act of “making holy,” or sanctifying a place to the service of God.¹⁰ But *chanakh* can also be used in another sense, which is “to train,” in either the sense of training a wild horse or of educating a child. Perhaps you recognize the classic example of this usage, from Proverbs 22:6: *chanokh l’naar al pi darko gam ki yazkin lo tasur mimena*,: “Train a youth according to his way, and even in old age he will not turn away from (your teaching).” To dedicate something is thus related to the act of training something to its purpose; for later rabbinic and modern Hebrew, this meaning produces the word *chinuch*, education.

Etymologists speculate that this field of meanings may have evolved from the term *chakh*, the palate of the mouth, for there was an ancient Semitic custom to place date honey on the palate of a baby before it began to suckle, so that the baby was in this way led by sweetness to its work of suckling – trained for its own sake you might say, or perhaps dedicated to its mother. (And, just yesterday, I learned from Aref Nyed that the etymologists are, in fact, describing a Bedouin practice he still observes in Libya!) If this etymology bears scrutiny, then consider the following field of connotations: taking in the word of God like a baby takes in mother’s milk, allowing our bodies to become houses of God’s wisdom, allowing our houses to become places of God’s indwelling, dedicating our temples of worship to be places of education, and sanctifying our places of study so that they are also places of ingesting God’s word.

On today’s occasion, might we therefore use the term “dedication” to refer to an extraordinary ceremony – like an inauguration – in which members of a House re-member the kairotic moment that founds their lives together? If so, we may observe that this memory also

brings with it memories of other times of dedication, so that the present moment of dedication may draw all members of the House together tightly to relive narratives of their shared past: about how and when and why their forebears stopped, on occasion, to re-collect their origins as a House and thus re-collect their shared blessing and mission. In this way, we may see how dedication, *chanukah*, is also education, *chinukh*, or re-training the members of a House *al pi darcham*, “according to their own way,” so that their hearts may be re-enflamed with the fire of faith and vision that characterizes their House.

We thus have reason to pray that the members of *this* House be blessed with this week’s inauguration as a time to be drawn tightly together in re-membering their shared educational mission.

D. The fourth lesson is a reflection on scripture as vessel for transmitting the ways of prayerful education.

A tenth feature of scriptural reasoning is that each member of a study fellowship is a member, first, of a House shaped by kairos and reshaped over time by practices of remembering that kairos and of being educated through its memory and its renewal.

An eleventh feature is that the English term “scripture” may be used to refer to the record of kairotic moments that is sanctified and preserved by such a House.

The English term is useful because its Latin root –*scribere*, “to write” – captures the focus on writing and thus reading that characterizes each specific tradition of scripture. It is useful, as well, because it leaves otherwise undetermined how a specific tradition will name and thus understand its scripture.¹¹ This introduces *a twelfth feature of scriptural reasoning*,

Which is that scriptural reasoning refrains from otherwise generalizing about the way a scripture will be named and maintained within a House. The way a House names its scripture belongs to the way it is received into intimate relation with God, and no name offered outside the House can be adequate to this intimate naming. A House therefore houses a scriptural tradition; to read scripture as scripture is to read it first in a House.

Does this mean that there is only one scripture we can call “scripture” in these terms? If so, is there only one House we can call “House?” If so, then what do we say of the other traditions that claim to house scripture? Do we say their record of kairotic moments is a false record? Or confused? If, on the other hand, we say there is more than one, then by what criteria is scripture named as scripture and a House as a House? If the criteria are strictly within the House, is there then no basis for judgment, let alone dialogue, between House and House?

By way of response, I return to the image I shared earlier: of a millennial day when Judaism will feel loved by—and will love! — the Church and the Mosque in a way that it has not loved or been loved before. Standing here in your House today is, for me, a proleptic sign of such an end day, the kind of sign you can actually taste and enter. And, when David Ford, Aref Nayed and I share our study fellowship, I believe we taste such an end time for that moment of study. And I believe that it is only within that moment that we know how respond to the question, “Is there only one House?” without replaying the unhappy dialectic of the old millennium, in which we are forced to choose: either our House alone or the identity of all houses, either revealed truth or some universal humanity.

While tasting a new millennium in our moment of shared study, we can practice some third way. Meeting together outside all three of our Houses – but still in sight of their open doors – we can examine our scriptural sources together: considering in what ways each plain sense speaks to the other, and how each relates to our deeper readings and to the contemporary concerns that lead us to read more deeply.¹² After hours of such study, even days, we may notice that our differences have become the topic of a reasoning out of scripture that opens each of us, somehow, to both greater love and understanding of our new peers and their scriptures *and* a greater passion for our own tradition and House.

“God is great,” we might say in parting, knowing that what we have tasted is nothing we could ourselves prepare but that, for God, it may be no more difficult than giving us the sun again each day when we awake.

Just yesterday, Aref Nayed taught the following text to David Ford and me, drawn from an anthology of the words of the Muslim Sage Ahmed al-Rifa’i:

There are times of injustice, when the oppressed cry out but no one heeds nor takes pity.
But there are also times when God fashions human affairs so that hearts converge with kindness, mutual support, and mutual love. Such a divine gift can indeed mend a troubled era.¹³

¹ All translations from the Tanakh in this essay are adapted from *Tanakh The Holy Scriptures, The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

² Perhaps because so many of Judaism’s great spiritual masters and teachers lived in Eastern Europe and therefore died in the Shoah, leaving us still weakened in the numbers and depths of our spiritual teachers; or perhaps because the enormity of loss – for example, one million children and babies gassed or burned alive – overwhelmed our traditions of theodicy (or accounting for God’s actions); but I really do not know why: “how long, O Lord?” For whatever reason, our people appears to have been left, too often, to draw merely logical inferences about relations between Jews and Gentiles and, because the data often exceeds comprehension, the inferences are often contradictory and the net result, despairing. The dominant inference of our parents’ generation was: if we had reason to fear and mistrust our European and Christian

neighbors before the Shoah, we have all the more reason now; so that if, we had sought a somewhat separate life before the Shoah, we should be seeking a fully separate one now. But much of our own generation draws the contrary inference from comparable data: before the Shoah, it took courage to maintain our separate faith in the face of a world that rejected us; after the evidence of the Shoah, it is simply foolish to try. The lessons of experience, in other words, have pulled Judaism into the contradictory ways of separatism and assimilationism.

Historians might indeed reassure us with the unhappy news that the religion as well as the society of the Jews has suffered yet survived catastrophic loss several times before: after her Babylonian Exile, for example, Israel returned with a renewed but profoundly transformed religion of the Book and of Temple worship; after Rome destroyed the Second Temple, the religion of book gave way to a religion of synagogue prayer and derashah or rabbinic text study. But, as yet, no historian can tell us what new form of rabbinic Judaism may eventually enflame our hearts after these most recently traumatized generations have passed. No one can say when an epoch of despair has passed and one of renewed faith will begin. Meanwhile, we study, pray, wait, and look for possible signs of a new epoch....

³ From the traditional Jewish daily morning prayer service.

⁴ See Dr. Nyomi's address in this collection, which echoes the remarkable words by Hans Frei:

A far more urgent issue for Christian interpretation is the unpredictable consequences of learning the "language" of the Jewish tradition.... To discover Midrash in all its subtlety and breadth of options and to understand *pshat* (the traditional sense) may well be to begin to repair a series of contacts established and broken time and again in the history of the Church, whenever linguistic and textual Old Testament issues became pressing in intra-Christian debate....

The most fateful issue for Christian self-description is that of gaining its autonomous vocation as a religion, after its defeat in its secondary vocation of providing ideological coherence, foundation, and stability to Western culture. Beyond that, however, the example of Judaism in the modern Western world might be a beacon to a reconstituted Christian community. (Hans Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition of scripture: Does it Stretch or Will it Break?" in *The Biblical and the Narrative Tradition*, ed. Frank McConnell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), repr. In Hans Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, eds. George Hunsinger and William Placher (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 117-152.

For me, this approach to Jewish-Christian hermeneutical dialogue has been continued most acutely in the work of George Lindbeck and Stanley Hauerwas. Consider, for example, Lindbeck's study of "Martin Luther and the Rabbinic Mind" [in Peter Ochs (ed), *Understanding the Rabbinic Mind: Essays on the Hermeneutic of Max Kadushin* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990); and repr. In George Lindbeck, *The Church In a Postliberal Age*, ed. James Buckley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 21-37.], where he writes: "Christians increasingly experience the kinds of socio-political marginality which may have contributed to the development of rabbinic Judaism.... Christians may then find models for their practice in both the pastoral/catechetical Luther and contemporary rabbinic reformers" (p. 37). And consider his study of "The Church as Israel" [for example in "Postmodern Hermeneutics and Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Case Study," in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, eds. T. Frymer-Kensky, et.al. (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 2000), 106-113.] And consider Hauerwas' many writings on a post-Constantinian Christianity. IN relation to Judaism, consider his claim in "Christian Ethics in Jewish Terms: A Response to David Novak" [in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*: 135-140] that "Christians in the West are just beginning to learn to live the way Jews have had to live since Christians took over the world by making Caesar a member of the Church" (140); and, earlier, "Remembering as a Moral Task: The Challenge of the Holocaust" [in *Cross Currents*, (Spring, 1991), repr. in S. Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, eds. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 327-347.]. Among my own reflections on this topic, consider P. Ochs (ed), *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993) and "Recovering the God of History: Scriptural Life after Death in Judaism and Christianity," in *Jews and Christians, People of God* eds. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003): 114-147.

⁵ And Patrick Miller, Max Stackhouse, Bruce McCormack, James Kay, Kathy Sakenfeld, Kathleen McVey, and even then I am, for lack of space, illustrating only a few of our many interlocutors on matters of scripture and theology at Princeton.

⁶ The CTI Scriptural Reasoning Research Group, with a three year tenure (2004-2006) and co-chaired by Stacy Johnson and Peter Ochs.

⁷ I have mind Robert Jenson's teaching that the presence of God among us is also the presence of the eschatological future among us: for example, that "God in Christ is (here following Gregory of Nyssa's own words) 'infinite over the past and infinite over the future'" [(Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology I* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): 216.]

⁸ Here are full references for each of these uses of *bayit*: As "house," "Jacob journeyed on to Sukkoth [which word means temporary hut or stall, by the way] and built a house for himself (*vayiven bayit*) and made stalls (*sukkoth*) for his cattle"(Gen. 33:17:). In this case, "house" is a home that a person builds (from the root *bahan*, "to build"), even temporarily, for protection and security. But the phrase "build a house" (*boneh bayit*) can also be used to mean something less physical: to establish a family, as in Ruth 4:11: "[When Ruth the Moabite joined the house of Boaz] All the people at the gate and the elders answered: May the Lord make the women who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the House of Israel (*boneh bet yisrael*).]" But the phrase "House of Israel" suggests that "house" may mean not only family but also multigenerational community. In that sense, and as we saw in the sense of David's palace or Solomon's Temple, the house may be something quite grand and seemingly permanent. The term can also be used in a diminutive sense, however, to refer to impermanent constructions. In the Book of Job, for example, we hear that the hope of an impious or evil person is like the house (*bet*) of a spider (8:14-15) -- that is, a web, or the house of a bird -- that is, a nest (27:18). In each case, the house is something that soon blows away: at best a *sukkah*, a temporary booth, or even less, a gossamer web soon blown by the wind.

More abstractly, *bayit* may refer to the minimal form of all these things we have mentioned: a receptacle, as in Is. 3:20: "On that day my Lord will strip off the finery of the anklets....the amulets and *batei hanefesh*—the houses of spirits -- that is, receptacles of perfume. More abstractly perhaps, *bayit* may refer to a body, as in Job 4:19: "Those who dwell in houses of clay, whose origin is dust"—that is, in the human body seen in its stark mortality and impermanence. Or, perhaps most abstractly of all, *bayit* may appear in an adverbial, construct form to mean "within" or "inside" or "inwards": as in *mi bet leperochet*—inside ("in the house of") the veil of the holy of holies (Ex 26:33).

⁹ *Deut. 20:5*: a general addresses his troops this way: "Is there anyone who has a built a new house and not dedicated it? Let him go back to his home and dedicate it, lest he die in battle and another dedicate it."

¹⁰ The classic example is, as you may expect, Solomon: "Thus the King and all the Israelites dedicated (*vayachnekhu*) the House of the Lord... That day the King sanctified the inner court" (2 Chr. 7:5=1 King 8:64).

¹¹ This time, I have not drawn lessons from the Hebrew sources, since each tradition speaks about scripture in a distinctive way. For comparative sake, however, some readers may want to consider the variety of Hebrew roots that may translates the English term "scripture." One pertinent Hebrew root is *ktv*, to write, like the Arabic *ktb* or, etymologically, "sewing together," as "sewing words together." The emphasis here is on the act of connecting letters and on the surface on which they are collected, or "inscribed." This surface could be stone tablets (such as Moses brought down from Sinai) or parchment or it could also be the heart (as in Pr. 3:3: "inscribe them on the tablet of your heart"). Scripture, in the sense of this cognate, is an inscription and thus recording of the letters of divine speech. In rabbinic Hebrew, the most telling expression is the term *torah she b'khtav*, "the Written Torah" or canonical Bible as received by the rabbis, as contrasted with the *torah she b'al peh*, "the Oral Torah," or the inherited and transmitted wisdom through which the rabbis articulated the deeper meaning of Torah for a given time and place in their communal lives [on which, see David Weiss Halivni, *Revelation Restored, Divine Writ and Critical Responses* (Boulder, Co: Westview, 1997) and *Peshat and Derash, Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). A second, pertinent Hebrew root concerns this very orality of scripture; it is *kra*, "to call," "to proclaim," "to read," appearing in a noun form, for example, as *mikre*, "reading" or "convocation (for proclamation or reading)." In rabbinic Hebrew, *mikre* is also used to refer to the "reading par excellence," or the written Torah, which usage is etymologically related to the Arabic *kor'an*, from "recitation." A third, pertinent Hebrew root is *sfr*, "to count, recount or relate," in both a quantitative sense of measuring an amount and a narrative sense of relating a story. Among noun forms

are thus *mispar*, number and *sipur*, story, *sofer*, scribe, and *sefer*, book. For our uses, the most pregnant usage is *sefer Torah*, the book of Torah, or the Five Books of Moses, which were traditionally inscribed on parchment by scribal priests, *soferim*, and deposited inside the Temple in the Holy of Holies. A fourth Hebrew term to consider is *torah* itself, or “instruction,” most likely derived from the root *yrh*, “to throw,” “shoot (arrows),” “point out” and “to teach”: where the teaching is of a directional sort, pointing somewhere or to some action, as in “instructing” priests how to be priests or Israel how to be Israel. Other cognates are *torah* in the sense of “custom” or “practice” and *moreh*, or teacher. From my own Jewish perspective, the English term “scripture” is most useful for our purposes in scriptural reasoning, both because it bears the connotations of all these Hebrew terms and because it captures the overlapping attention all three Abrahamic traditions pay to sacred text traditions.

¹² This image comes literally from the way our scriptural reasoning societies work. We most often study together in places outside a specific House or at least, to be sure, outside the worship space defined by a single House. Yet, each Jewish or Muslim or Christian sub-group of us turns periodically away from this shared space to a space for separate prayer; but doors to this separate space remain open. I am therefore offering a rather literal image, rather than a general metaphor that might confine the ontological precincts of a “House” so narrowly.

¹³ *Al Kulyat al-Ahadiyah* (an anthology of the words of the Muslim Sage Ahmed al-Rifa’i), ed. Abu al-Huda al-Siadi (Maktabat al-Thakafa al-Dinyah,; Cairo, 2004): P. 147. Translation by Aref Nayed.