Mostly Harmless is the fifth book in Douglas Adams’ increasingly inaccurately titled Hitch Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy Trilogy. In this novel we again meet Arthur Dent, something of a cosmic nomad, wandering through a homeless and apparently meaningless universe. Arthur doesn’t like things this way. Somehow he knows that his reality isn’t what it ought to be. So he travels to the planet Hawalius, famous for its population of oracles, seers and soothsayers. On this planet he meets a prophet who places before him what on Hawalius is common knowledge:

You cannot see what I see because you see what you see. You cannot know what I know because you know what you know. What I see and what I know cannot be added to what you see and what you know because they are not of the same kind. Neither can it replace what you see and what you know, because that would be to replace you yourself…. Everything you see or hear or experience in any way at all is specific to you. You create a universe by perceiving it, so everything in the universe you perceive is specific to you.1

For some reason, this piece of Hawalian wisdom doesn’t do much for Arthur. Knowing the uniqueness of his own cognitive functioning and being assured that his perceiving abilities could accomplish nothing less than to create a universe doesn’t address Arthur's problem, which is that in his universe (self-created or not) something has gone terribly wrong. Indeed, the prophet’s advice could only make things worse. If the universe is created by one’s own perception of it, then any experience of the universe being awry is essentially the fault of the perceiver. So Arthur’s malaise is of his own making.

The narrator, however, will not leave Arthur (or us) here. The story gets picked up

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a few pages later and we get a glimpse of Arthur’s deepest longings.

He so much wanted to be home. He so much wanted his own home world, the actual Earth he had grown up on, not to have been demolished. He so much wanted none of this to have happened. He so much wanted that when he opened his eyes again he would be standing on the doorstep of his little cottage in the west country of England, that the sun would be shining over the green hills, the post van would be going up the lane, the daffodils would be blooming in the garden, and in the distance the pub would be opening for lunch.2

While the prophet offers Arthur assurances of his omnicompetence to create his own unique and specific world by means of his perception, Arthur longs for a commonly shared world—the “actual Earth,” complete with familiar hills, postal vans, daffodils and pubs. He longs for home.

Arthur’s homelessness, construed in terms of a science fiction genre, echoes the postmodern condition. Postmodern a/theologian Mark Taylor describes the postmodern self as a “wanderer,” a “drifter,” “attached to no home,” and “always suspicious of stopping, staying and dwelling.” This “rootless and homeless” self is no more than a “careless wanderer” yearning for neither “completion” nor “fulfillment” and therefore is not unhappy.3 All of this sounds like Arthur Dent except that Arthur is tired of the wandering, desperately seeks completion, is profoundly unhappy and simply wants to go home. The problem is that it seems that there is no way back for Arthur. As Thomas Wolfe said, “You can’t go home again.”

Lily Tomlin’s character, Trudy the bag lady, could be seen as something of a literary fellow traveller with Arthur Dent. In Tomlin’s one-woman Broadway production, The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe, the homeless Trudy is our guide through the show. She explains that she is helping some aliens from outer space to

2 Ibid., p. 89.
determine whether, in their search for intelligent life in the universe, the planet earth might be a likely location. The prospects do not seem too promising!

But not only do we have the aliens’ cultural perspective, Trudy herself sees things aslant. Speaking of her own madness, Trudy exclaims:

I refuse to be intimidated by reality anymore. After all, what is reality anyway? Nothin’ but a collective hunch. My space chums think reality was once a primitive method of crowd control that got out of hand. In my view, it’s absurdity dressed up in a three-piece business suit.

I made some studies, and reality is the leading cause of stress among those in touch with it. I can take it in small doses, but as a lifestyle I found it too confining.⁴

Trudy figures that being “out of touch” with reality isn’t such a bad idea. After all, it’s less stressful. But what is reality anyway? Nothing but a collective hunch.

Of course, being out of touch with reality also raises the question of one’s sanity. So later in the show Trudy asks herself whether she is crazy or not and answers with a resounding “Yes!” But Trudy’s question, and its answer, raises the question for all of us. Are we all crazy? Are we all homeless bag ladies? Is there any way that we can make a “reality check”? Or is any reality we could check our constructions against itself merely a construction?

Characteristic of all social constructions of reality (or culture-forming worldviews) is an answer to the ultimate question, Where are we?⁵ And postmodern culture is in

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⁴ Jane Wagner, The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), p. 18. The play, written by Wagner, is acted by Tomlin, who has become in effect the play’s co-author by the joint development of the script at the workshop stage.

⁵ Richard Middleton and I have suggested that every worldview implicitly or explicitly must answer at least the following four ultimate questions: Where are we? Who are we? What’s wrong? What’s the remedy? See our Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1984), and our Truth is Stranger Than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995).
fundamental continuity with the Baconian tradition of modernity in its answer to this question.\textsuperscript{6} Where are we? We are in a world of our own construction. But while that answer has animated and driven the experiment in history known as “modernity” for around half a millennia, filling modern culture with self-confidence and pride, in a postmodern context this answer can often leave us with dread and a paralyzing anxiety. While modern culture was self-assured in its control of the world and taming of nature in order to make a human home, a postmodern culture is plagued by a profound homelessness.\textsuperscript{7}

**Omnipotent World Constructors Without a Home**

When Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann first introduced the notion of social constructions of reality they described the way in which such constructions made the world a “home” for people.\textsuperscript{8} Human beings do not receive the world as their home apart from constructing (or construing) it as such. But the institutional order in which we live—the social nomos that we inhabit—most effectively makes the world a home for us when

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\textsuperscript{6} Richard Rorty distinguishes between the Cartesian and Baconian ideals in modernity by identifying the former with a realism that requires an intellectual submission to reality as an external, inflexible given, and the latter with an optimistic autonomy that transforms the world in accordance with utopian values. Rorty argues that postmodernity is characterized by the rejection of the Cartesian ideal and the radicalization of the Baconian. In a fundamental sense, then, postmodern culture, especially as it is manifest in simulacra and hyperreality, is a continuance and intensification of (one aspect of) the modern. See Rorty’s *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 33, esp. n. 15.

\textsuperscript{7} The problem of “roots” and the search for a place to call “home” was the theme of *Utne Reader* 39 (March/June 1990). See especially John Berger’s article, “You can’t go home: The hidden pain of 20th century life,” (pp. 85-87), excerpted from his book *And our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).


its constructed character is hidden. And such a hiding of constructiveness is best accomplished by religion. In *The Sacred Canopy* Berger argues that in religious legitimation, “humanly constructed nomoi are given a cosmic status,” and the “empirical tenuousness” of the historical institutions that make the world a home for us “is transformed into an overpowering stability as they are understood as but manifestations of the underlying structure of the universe.”

The problem is that once we become aware of the fact that our sense of being at-home in the world is a construal, not a given, that sense of being at-home is stripped away from us. The result is a sense of cosmic homelessness.

To use Berger’s terms, once we notice that the sacred canopy is a cultural product, not a gift of the gods, that canopy can no longer provide ultimate protection. And without that protection we “are submerged in a world of disorder senselessness and madness.”

Joining Trudy the bag lady in her insanity or Arthur Dent in his galactic homelessness, our experience of a well-ordered home—a symbolic universe of nomic structures—gives way to a terrifying anomie. The experience of the world as our home, in the sense of a place where we belong and know the rules and responsibilities of the house, is lost and a nomadic homelessness dominates the horizon.

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9 See Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City: Doubleday/Anchor, 1969), p. 33. Similarly, Clifford Geertz says that a worldview best provides a secure home for human activity when it is so internalized that we simply assume that we experience reality the way it truly is, that our picture of the world is “the way things in sheer actuality are.” *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 89. Consequently, becoming aware of a worldview as a worldview, of its particularity, subjectivity and limitations can have a profoundly anomic effect on an individual or community.

10 Ibid, pp. 36, 37.


12 Sacred Canopy, p. 22


This problem is deepened in postmodern critique. Postmodern authors like Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Terry Eagleton go beyond the language of social construction to describe our relation to the world in terms of metanarratives and totalizing ways of thinking that are inherently violent.\textsuperscript{14} From the perspective of these postmodern authors, not only is the world socially constructed, we also necessarily erect our constructions in violent ways that invariably oppress the marginal while ideologically legitimating those with the most world-constructing power.

Further, the notion of home has always carried with it a sense of centredness.\textsuperscript{15} Mircea Eliade notes that constitutive to mythical thought is the belief that home is most fundamentally identified with the \textit{axis mundi}, the sacred centre of creation which functions both as a point of cosmic order in the midst of chaos and as the window from the realm of the profane to that of the sacred.\textsuperscript{16} “Home,” therefore carries an aura of sacredness, of ultimacy—something to be defended against all that is unfamiliar, all the decentering


\textsuperscript{15} Yi-Fu Tuan says, “In an ideal sense home lies at the center of one’s life.” \textit{Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p. 128. Similarly, E. Relph says that “Home is the foundation of our identity as individuals and as members of a community, the dwelling place of being ..., an irreplaceable centre of significance.” \textit{Place and Placelessness} (London: Pion, 1976), p. 39.

forces of chaos that exist outside the bounds of home. As a centering structure home provides us with a sense of being fundamentally grounded in the universe, and therefore it is the place where anomic anxiety can be mastered.

Richard Bernstein notes, however, that it is precisely such a mastering of anxiety by feeling at-home at the center of the world that Derrida deconstructs. Bernstein says that “one reason why [Derrida’s] writings are at times so powerful and disconcerting is that he has an uncanny (unheimlich) ability to show us that at the heart of what we take to be familiar, native, at home—where we think we can find our center—lurks (is concealed and repressed) what is unfamiliar, strange, and uncanny.” Consequently, Derrida is “always encouraging us to question the status of what we take to be our center, our native home, our arche.” Indeed, Derrida says that the metaphysics of presence which attempted to secure a sense of metaphysical comfort for humankind was fundamentally ruptured with the realization that,

There was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of substitutions came into play. This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse ….

And we have seen that the “function” of this nonlocus center has, by and large, been to

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18 Ibid, p. 183. Bernstein then cites Henry Statten: “Deconstruction is not a defense of formlessness, but a regulated overflowing of established boundaries,” and then comments, “The point is not that we can best along without demarcating boundaries, but rather there is no “boundary fixing” that cannot itself be questioned.” (p. 184) From Statten’s book, Wittgenstein and Derrida (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 34.

19 Jacques Derrida, Limited Inc., ed. by Gerald Graff (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 93. Again, Rubenstein’s commentary is helpful: “… Derrida seeks to show us that we never quite are or can be at home in the world. We are always threatened by the uncanniness of what is canny: we are always in exile—even from ourselves. We may long and dream of being at home in our world, to find a “proper” center, but we never achieve this form of presence or self-presence.” New Constellation, p. 179.
erect a totality structure of security and home for some and marginality and homelessness for others. In the light of twentieth century violence it seems fair to say that, “The entire metaphysics of being “at home” in the world now seems hollow.”20

When we add to this deconstructive critique of modernity’s worldview the voice of the environmental movement we meet the argument that not only is the modern worldview a particularly violent way in which to construct reality, it has also defiled the house in which we live through the exploitation and despoliation of the “natural” environment.21

It is therefore appropriate to describe postmodernity as a culture of radical homelessness. We can no longer be at-home in the world: first, because we recognize that any notion of the world as home is merely a social construction. Second, we are confronted with the violence of our social construction vis a vis other people in the world whereby home for one group of people is homelessness for others. And third, the very environment in which we live is now polluted to the point where it is becoming inhospitable to us and even a threat to any sense of humans remaining at-home in this world. Bruce Cockburn is right—the notion of “home” has become little more than a “sweet fantasia,” not a reality of safety and love.22

**Primordiality of Home**

But can human beings live without a sense of home? Is the postmodern valorization of homelessness and embrace of the nomadic life of the carnival hustler


culturally or psychologically sustainable? I cannot answer this question in any detail here but it does seem to me that the primordiality of both a memory of home and an expectation or hope of homecoming is constitutive to human life and foundational to culture-forming. Here Emmanuel Levinas is helpful. In *Totality and Infinity* he argues that the “privileged role of the home does not consist in being the end of human activity but in being its condition, and in this sense its commencement.” Because human activity proceeds from a sense of being at-home, Levinas claims that “civilization refers to the incarnation of consciousness and to inhabitation—to existence from the intimacy of a home, the first concretization.” Both echoing and distancing himself from the late Heidegger, Levinas sums up his view of dwelling as follows:

To exist henceforth means to dwell. To dwell is not the simple fact of the anonymous reality of a being cast into existence as a stone one casts behind oneself; it is a recollection, a coming to oneself, a retreat home with oneself as in a land of refuge, which answers to a hospitality, an expectancy, a human welcome.

Indeed, even the language of exile so common (and appropriately so) in postmodern discourse necessarily assumes the primordiality of home and hopes for some kind of homecoming. In an essay entitled “Racism’s Last Word,” written for a catalog of an art exhibition against apartheid in Paris, 1983, Derrida writes of the exhibition as remaining “in exile in the sight of its proper residence, its place of destination to come—

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25 Ibid, p. 156. The Heideggarian echoes are clear. In his essay, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” Heidegger writes, “What then does ich bin mean? The old word bauen, to which the bin belongs, answers: ich bin, du bist means I dwell, you dwell.” “To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell.” And on the priority of such dwelling or sense of being at-home to all culture-forming, Heidegger says, “We do not dwell because we have built, but we build and have built because we dwell, that is because we are dwellers.” In *Basic Writings*, edited by Daved Farel Klre, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992), p. 349.


For further critique of Heidegger’s self-enclosed home for solitary Dasein see Richard Rubenstein’s essay “Heidegger’s Silence?: Ethos and Technology,” in *The New Constellation*, pp. 79-141.
and to create.” The discourse of exile remembers a “proper residence,” hopes for a return to that residence, and bears witness against the powers that force this exile. Without the memory of home and the vision of a hoped-for homecoming, the exiles lose their identity and are eternally relegated to the margins of homelessness.

The theological question that I am concerned with in this project on postmodern homelessness, is whether a rehearing of biblical memories and biblical hopes can provide us not with a false security of being at-home again, but with orientation on our way, in our exile. To put the question differently, does the biblical memory of landed/landloss, inheritance/exile engender a home-building praxis in the midst of culture-wide homelessness? Or to use the language of Walter Brueggemann, does the postmodern experience of homelessness give us an opportunity to rehear the biblical “cadences which redescribe” our exilic situation, and provide us with a prophetic imagination which will empower us to “picture, portray, receive and practice the world in ways other than it appears to be at first glance when seen through a dominant, habitual, unexamined lens”? While this hermeneutics of retrieval recognizes that such imagination is “a human act” that does “not yield the kind of certitude required by Cartesian anxiety,” it nonetheless, “does yield a possible ‘home’ when we accept a participating role as ‘home-maker.’” To such a hermeneutical exploration I will now turn.

Creation, Exile and Home

We have seen that Arthur Dent feels homeless in a universe that he can reconstruct


29 Ibid.
simply by means of his own perception. And since social constructions of reality have precisely the task of making the natural environment into a home for us, then one would think that Arthur really should heed the wisdom of the Hawalian prophet and get over his sense of aimlessness and displacement in the universe simply by looking at things differently.\textsuperscript{30}

Trudy the bag lady figures that reality is no more than a collective hunch. The problem is that her hunch doesn’t jive that well with the rest of the world. That’s why she is crazy and everyone else is sane. That’s also why she is homeless. To be at-home in this world boils down to sharing the collective hunch of the majority. But who gets to determine what the majority will take to be reality? Who gets to say what “home” really is? Whose collective hunch gets to rule? And the answer is that it is the three-piece business suit view of reality that rules. It is those with the most economic, technological and political power that will hegemonically define reality. And they will be at-home in this reality of their own making, leaving anyone else who views things differently, designated as crazy and homeless.

The problem is that in a postmodern world we are all homeless. Arthur Dent and Trudy the bag lady come to represent all of us. The worldview crisis that postmodernity has precipitated has left us not only with a profound anxiety but also with a sense of betrayal, dispossession and exile.\textsuperscript{31} The modern individual, autonomous monad has become the postmodern exiled nomad.

It is in precisely such a context that the biblical story speaks most eloquently of

\textsuperscript{30} There is perhaps some truth in this advice. While home cannot be totally divorced from geography—from place—it is clearly more than geography. Home is a matter of perception, imagination, vision.

\textsuperscript{31} James Olthuis raises the question of whether we experience our life as “embedded” in the world or “entangled.” “An Ethics of Compassion: Ethics in a Post-Modernist Age,” in What Right Does Ethics Have? Public Philosophy in a Pluralistic Culture, edited by Sander Griffioen (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit Press, 1990), p. 140. The former image affirms the goodness of our creatureliness, while the latter draws attention to the ambiguity and brokenness of that creatureliness. Perhaps we could put the question this way: are we embedded in our creational home, or entangled in a deathly wilderness? We will see that it is precisely in the wilderness that God creates a creational home.
being at-home in a secure creation. The most powerful biblical language of coming home is articulated in the context of either wilderness wanderings or exile. Such language speaks words of healing and hope in a postmodern age.

In the Scriptures, wilderness is Israel’s most radical memory of homelessness and threat. The wilderness is referred to as a “barren and howling waste” (Dt. 32.10), echoing the “formless void” (tohu wabohu) of Gen. 1.1. This is a place that Jeremiah describes as “not sown” (2.2). The radical opposite of the garden, and contrary to the Creator’s intention of a fruit-bearing creation, this place is seedless. In the biblical story, wilderness cannot be home because it does not provide the necessary culture-forming resources to make it a home. One cannot “be fruitful and multiply” in the wilderness because in such a wasteland there is nothing to “till and keep” (Gen. 1.28, 2.15). Stewardship, as the loving and careful management of creation, is not possible in the wilderness. Yet precisely because wilderness is a place where it seems impossible to fulfill our call as God’s image-bearing agents in the creation, does it become a place where Israel is reawakened to the gift character of the world. Walter Brueggemann perceptively notes that “wilderness is not managed land … but is gifted land ….”

The story of the manna and quail in Exodus 16 illustrates this point well. Faced with starvation in the wilderness, the Israelites begin to be nostalgic about Egypt. They complain to Moses:

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32 See also Job. 12.24; Ps. 107.40; Jer. 4.23.

33 Clearly echoing biblical themes, Heidegger says that to dwell means “to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine.” “Building Dwelling Thinking,” p. 349.

34 I am indebted to my colleague James Olthuis for an understanding of the relationship of gift and call. See his article, “Be(com)ing: Humankind as Gift and Call,” Philosophia Reformata 58, no. 2 (1993): 153-172.


If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger. (16.3)

In Egypt things were managed well. Indeed, we could say that Pharaoh’s royal ideology hegemonically controlled the world in such a way that a well-constructed home was established. Even the Jewish slaves of the empire could appreciate the fact that, all of their oppression notwithstanding, there still was food at the end of a day of impossible brick quotas. Being marginalized by a totalizing power is at least better than finding oneself completely without resources in a wilderness of death. Yahweh, however, doesn’t think so. Totalizing, hegemonic rule is not a viable option for this God. Satiation under the terms of injustice and oppression is not acceptable. Such a response to the call to stewardship is fundamentally against life, it is fundamentally anti-creational, subverting the goodness of this creation. And so the story tells us of how God overthrows this hegemonic power—wages war on this totality—and takes the Israelites into the wilderness. But what then? Is wilderness starvation really preferable to oppressive satiation?

Yahweh’s response is to provide satiation in the wilderness—the gift of manna and quail. In this story we are surprised to learn that security in this creation—the security of daily bread and meat—is ultimately dependent not upon our management, our constructions, our control, of the creation, but upon receiving such security and satiation as a gift from the hand of God. Wilderness becomes a place of sustenance. It is precisely in a context where constructions are impossible that there is a renewed opportunity for gift

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36 On reading the exodus story in terms of the forces of creation and anti-creation see Terence Fretheim’s commentary Exodus, Interpretation Series (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991). See also his article, “The Plagues as Ecological Signs of Historical Disaster,” Journal of Biblical Literature 110, 3 (Fall, 1991): 385-396. Richard Middelton and I have addressed the question of the goodness of creation further in Truth is Stranger Than It Used To Be, pp. 152-155.

37 Lyotard says, “Let us wage war on totality, let us be witnesses of the unrepresentable, let us activate the differences.” [The Postmodern Condition, p. 82.] In the exodus narrative, this is precisely what Yahweh does!
reception. And this story goes on to make sure that Israel gets the point by insisting that the manna and quail must not be stored up for the next day. Israel must live totally dependent upon the life-giving resources of their God.

This does not mean, however, that wilderness becomes the final destiny of Israel. While the wilderness experience teaches Israel anew that their security and sense of being at-home in this world must be rooted in the reception of the creation as a radically contingent gift, nonetheless, in the biblical worldview, they cannot be at-home simply on the basis of gift-reception. There is still a call inherent in every gift. The gift of an eloquent, good, responsive creation which is our home, is given for stewardly care. The gift must be cultivated.

The problem is that the reception of the gift carries with it deadly temptations. On the plains of Moab Israel pauses on the boundary of the promised land. And the book of Deuteronomy records for us the question that Israel must face before taking “possession” of that land. Once you are no longer dependent upon daily manna and quail but are responding to your call to stewardly care and manage the land, will you remember that this land is the gift of the covenant God, or will you forget that this is covenant land and begin to exercise autonomous and hegemonic rule over it? In Deuteronomy the contingent character of being landed, of receiving the inheritance, is repeatedly emphasized. A gift given can be a gift lost. Israel must find their sense of being at-home in the creation by means of listening to their covenant God. And they can only be secure in


39 See especially Dt. 6 and 8. Deeply rooted in biblical discourse, Levinas recognizes the temptations of possession. He says that possession “neutralizes” the being of the thing; it “masters, suspends, postpones the unforeseeable future of the element—its independence, its being.” Totality and Infinity, p. 158

40 Brueggemann says, “The gifted land is covenanted land. It is not only nourishing space. It is also covenanted place.” The Land, p. 52.
the land if they engage in a stewardship of the land that attends to their covenantal responsibility both to the land itself (granting it Sabbath rest, thereby facilitating its creational praise⁴¹) and to the most vulnerable inhabitants of the land—the poor.⁴² Indeed, the text says, “Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that Yahweh your God is giving you” (Dt. 16.20). We can be at-home in this world, and we can engage in home-building tasks, but that home-building must be directed to justice, to a hearing of the voice of the other, and to a setting of the captives free. If we attempt to make this world a home of ideological control and self-service, then, says Deuteronomy, we will again find ourselves homeless, subject to the hegemonic whims of someone else.

This, of course, is precisely what happened. Israel got “a king like the nations” (1 Sam. 8.5b) and proceeded to establish a culture “like the nations.” This royal culture not only ignored the pleas of the poor, engaged in violent oppression and forgot the covenantal character of the land and its inhabitants, it also did what all hegemonic rule attempts to do—it made a home for God! The rule of Solomon, especially his building of a Temple for Yahweh, has been justifiably described as “the paganization of Israel.”⁴³ Beyond anything as abstract as assuming a “metaphysics of presence,” Solomon, and the royal tradition that followed him, ideologically legitimated his hegemonic rule by means of a domestication of the Presence. By building a house—a domicile—for God, Solomon attempted to domesticate God, using the divine Presence as the most ultimate and final legitimation of his own rule. This is the way that temple and palace related throughout the ancient Near East, and Israel was no different. The house of God, situated at the very centre of creation, legitimates the house of the king and both can be securely at-home in

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⁴² See the injunctions about the sabbatical year and the year of Jubilee in Lev. 25.

the world.

The prophetic tradition is an impassioned protest against this arrangement, against this way of being at-home in the world, and for a return to covenant. Rooted in the story of the exodus God, the prophets declare that God will not be domesticated by the temple. Rather, the covenant God will, in fact, abandon the temple, leave this house, and take Israel into exile. The centering and hegemonic construct of the palace and temple is prophetically deconstructed. In Derridean terms, this construct secured a false metaphysical comfort and the message to those who have become secure, yet also numb and apathetic, is that they will once again be stripped of their homes and cast into homelessness. This is the fate of those who manage the land and construct their homes without covenantal listening, who have forgotten that land is to be managed as a gift.\textsuperscript{44}

Exile is a return to the wilderness. It is an experience of radical landloss, and therefore a fundamental experience of homelessness. Once again Israel finds themselves in a situation in which there is no room for home-making. All of their royal constructions have been deconstructed and they must now live under the obviously successful rule of Babylonian constructions of reality. And once again, it is precisely in such a situation that a radical word of hope and homecoming can be heard anew.

A prophetic imagination perceives in history radical reversals.\textsuperscript{45} The secure and landed royal court will become landless exiles. Those who are at-home in their

\textsuperscript{44} Commenting on Jeremiah, Brueggemann says, “Israel had become numbed and dull, stupid (4.22), having lost the capacity to be embarrassed (8.12). In its alienated security it had settled for nonreflective apathy, surely the last achievement of amnesia in the land.” The Land, p. 111. Later he says that keeping land depends “on knowing that life is rooted in dialogue, of speaking and having to answer, of being surprised and precarious in the exchange which gives life” (p. 121).

James T. Morgan notes that, “Once a people have ‘arrived’ or feel they have a home, then they learn to reenact in the comfort of their sanctuaries or homes the past dramas of escape from enslavement and suffering.” “Memory, Land and Pilgrimage: Roots of Spirituality,” Religious Education 87, no. 4 (Fall 1992), p. 565. We would need to add, however, that ritually reenacting the past dramas can itself be a cover-up for a numbed amnesia if it is not coupled with a contemporary enacting of those dramas in a praxis of justice. This would seem to be the heart of the critique of the returned exiles in Is. 58.

constructions will be homeless. The self-blessed will be cursed. But those who are cursed will also experience blessing. Those who are thrust into a barren homelessness will settle down and bear fruit. Jeremiah counsels the exiles in Babylon to make that exilic situation into home, to “build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce … multiply there, and do not decrease” (29.5,6). Brueggemann comments:

The assurance is that what had seemed homelessness is for now a legitimate home. What had seemed barren exile is fruitful garden. What had seemed alienation is for now a place of binding interaction. His very word redefined a place for placeless Israel. The assurance is that the landless are not wordless. He speaks just when the silence of God seemed permanent. Exile is the place for a history-initiating word.\[46\]

Where there is covenantal word and a listening to that word, there human beings can experience life as home in creation. Home is granted to us by the very word of God that called the creation to be and continues to sustain it. Home construction apart from that word will always result in homelessness. Listening to that word empowers us to build houses, be at-home, and experience fruitfulness even in the barrenness of an exilic situation.

But exile is never the final word of this covenant God. That is why the prophets (even Jeremiah) envision a world beyond exile, beyond landlessness.\[47\] They envision homecoming. Isaiah 40 to 55 is perhaps the most evocative literature of homecoming in the whole Bible.\[48\] Rooted in a radical faith in Yahweh as the Creator God who sent this people (and accompanied them) into exile, Isaiah proclaims that the Word of God will do a new thing (42.9, 43.19, 48.6) and will not return empty (55.11).

Thus says God, the Lord
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it

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46 The Land, pp. 125-126.

47 “The Bible never denies that there is landlessness or that it is deathly. But it rejects every suggestion that landlessness is finally the will of God.” Ibid., p. 127.

48 Brueggemann makes this point in Hopeful Imagination, ch. 5.
and spirit to those who walk in it:
I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness. (42.5-7)

This is powerful and evocative language for a God whose people are still in exile. Rather than simply present them with the rhetoric of ultimate victory over their oppressors, this God promises that they will be a covenant to the people and a light to the nations. This is, after all, not a local deity, but the Creator God speaking here. This God is concerned with all of creation and therefore all of the nations. Homecoming, then must not be a return to a self-secure royal ideology, yet another attempt at building a home with even higher protective walls. Rather, homecoming for Isaiah is a matter of renewed covenant. And covenants are always for healing and ministry. It is significant that the text does not say that Yahweh will make a covenant with Israel, but rather that Yahweh will give Israel to be a covenant to the peoples. The very existence of the people of God, their return home, is to be of service to others.49 Such an open, hospitable, serving home is the only kind worth having. Indeed, without such an understanding of covenantal service, all of our home-building efforts will result in homelessness.

Receiving the gift of home in an exilic context charges the homecomers with the responsibility of hospitality. And that responsibility is occasioned by the address of an Other that requires a response. This too, is a Levinasian theme with profound biblical echoes. The home-building enterprise of the totalizing ideology of either ancient Israel or modernity is predicated upon the neutralization of alterity.50 Levinas taps deeper springs


50 On the totalizing character of Israel’s “royal ideology” see Walter Brueggemann, Israel’s Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), esp. ch. 3.
of biblical insight with his insistence on the priority of the Other who “paralyzes possession”51 of the home in order to open the home to hospitality.52 This results in a certain mode of “sojourning in a home;” an experience of home which is “open to the Other” and therefore characterized by “a disengagement, a wandering.”53 To be at-home, then is only possible in the non-aggressive advent of the Other into one’s dwelling, “not in a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness, which affirms my place (Lieu) precisely as a home (maison).”54 Levinas evocatively concludes that, “the possibility for the home to open to the Other is as essential to the essence of the home as closed doors and windows.”55 True homecoming is only possible if the security of home is extended to the vulnerability of the other, if the safety of the familiar is extended beyond the boundaries of home to the unfamiliar, the alien.

Throughout biblical literature, the experiences of historical rescue from hegemonic empires (Egypt and Babylon) and homecoming inheritance and return, is invariably connected to the reign of God. Moses and Miriam conclude the triumphal Song of the Sea with the words, “Yahweh will reign forever and ever” (Ex. 15.18), and the good news of Isaiah comes to a crashing crescendo when the runner blurts out his breathless message, “Your God reigns” (52.7). In the first story, the rule of Yahweh is the reason for liberation. In the second story, the reign of God leads to homecoming.56

51 Totality and Infinity, p. 171.

52 Michael Purcell helpfully summarizes Levinas’ perspective as follows: “Securing the home does not result in the emptiness and coldness of shelter, but in the interiority and the intimacy of welcome, for the dwelling refers essentially beyond itself to an other person, who, while remaining absolutely other and transcendent with respect to me, beyond my acquisitive grasp, and while contesting my happy possession of the world, yet draws close to me in intimacy, inviting my response and actually rendering me responsible subjectivity.” “Homelessness as a Theological Motif,” p. 96.

53 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, pp. 172-173.

54 Ibid., p. 150.

55 Ibid., p. 173.

Jesus stood firmly in this tradition when he came into Galilee proclaiming, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news” (Mk. 1.15). He came as another prophet of homecoming—for where the kingdom is, there the subjects will find their home and protection. And he came to a situation that was still fundamentally one of exile. Israel remained under the rule of a powerful empire, and was inhibited in fulfilling her call to be stewards of creation because the land is subject to Roman rule. In this context Jesus joined the chorus of so many others who proclaimed the end of exile and the radical inversion of history. But his proclamation called for no heroic military action, no grasping of national liberation, and no autonomous construction of an alternative social order. Rather, he stood in the prophetic tradition of radical inversion:

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. (Mk. 8.35)

Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. (Mk. 9.35)

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Mk. 10.42-44)

Herein Jesus rejected “the world of grasping” and affirmed “the world of gift.” As the one who had no place to lay his head and is crucified outside of the city walls, he rejected a possession of home as a place of self-security and inaugurated a homecoming in a welcoming community of discipleship. He came as the agent of the kingdom of God, dispensing the gifts of the kingdom to those who had been dispossessed. His ministry of

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58 Brueggemann, The Land, p. 172.
healing, exorcism, table fellowship and teaching restored the broken, set free the 
oppressed, welcomed the outcast and taught a new pathway home. This was the path of 
the cross, of sacrificial suffering on behalf of another. Those who grasp their life, who 
attempt to take back their home by force,\textsuperscript{59} will lose their life and remain homeless. The 
way back home, says Jesus, the way beyond this present exile, is the way of the cross.

Christian theology, attentive to the cadences of biblical language and the cries of 
postmodern homelessness proclaims that this world cannot be our home when we seek to 
secure it as such. Home is a gift. This gift is still offered to us in a postmodern context 
populated by disappointed, wandering, homeless nomads. Grasping the gift will invariably 
result in its loss. Receiving the gift and heeding its call to a suffering service can provide 
us with a profound sense of home even in the midst of exile and animate our lives with a 
hope of a final restoration, a final and joyous homecoming. But that homecoming is only 
sustainable if it is manifest in a home-making community that is characterized by a praxis 
of hospitality for those who, like Arthur Dent and Trudy the bag lady, do not seem to 
belong. Then, perhaps the Christian community will be known as the “repairer of the 
breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” (Is. 58.12)

\textsuperscript{59} See Mt. 11.12