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# THE BIBLE IN POLITICS

How to Read the Bible Politically

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## Introduction

Many Christians have recently been rediscovering the political dimension of the message of the Bible. This is really a return to normality, since the notion that biblical Christianity has nothing to do with politics is little more than a modern Western Christian aberration, which would not have been entertained by the Church in most periods and places of its history. But political interpretation of the Bible has many pitfalls for the unwary. It is all too easy to read our own prejudices into the Bible, while it is not at all easy to move intelligently, without anachronism, between the political societies of biblical times and the very different societies of today. The aim of this book is to help the reader towards an understanding of the political relevance of the Bible which will be both more disciplined and more imaginative than some current attempts to read the Bible politically. It offers neither a summary of the political teaching of the Bible nor a programme for Christian political action, but a prerequisite for those things: a course in political hermeneutics. In other words—lest the word *hermeneutics* put some people off—it is for those who want to know *how* to interpret the Bible politically. Along the way we shall reach many particular conclusions about the teaching of the Bible and its relevance to modern political issues, but these are essentially illustrations of a method which readers are encouraged to pursue for themselves. Although they cover quite a lot of biblical and political ground, they are a representative sample, not an exhaustive survey.

The first chapter is methodological: an introduction to hermeneutical issues and principles which will then be illustrated in practice in the rest of the book. Biblical interpretation is more of an art than an exact science. Like all art it has its rules and requires considerable discipline, but good interpretation is much more than a matter of following rules which can be learned in advance. Hence, after the first chapter, this book aims to teach by involving the reader in the practice of hermeneutics. Five chapters (2–6) offer examples of the political exegesis of specific, relatively

short biblical passages. These sample texts have been selected for their diversity: they represent different types of biblical literature and relate to a fairly broad range of political issues. And, since the hermeneutical approach pursued in these chapters is to interpret the texts not in isolation but in relation to the rest of Scripture, they often range further than the passages to which they are anchored. The focus, however, in these chapters is on the detailed exegesis of particular texts, without which any biblical interpretation is bound to be shoddy and insecure.

A different, equally necessary approach to the biblical material is illustrated by chapter 7, in which a particular theme is traced through the whole Bible and the broad contours of its treatment in the Bible are delineated and developed. Chapters 8 and 9 bring parts of the Bible which few readers would expect to have modern political relevance into relationship with two of the most characteristically modern of political facts. The aim is to show how a creative encounter between the biblical texts and the modern realities can generate fresh insight, and so how the Bible can prove itself relevant in quite novel as well as well-trying ways. For it to do so is quite essential if a political hermeneutic is to be at all adequate to the needs of political praxis in the contemporary world. Finally, a concluding reflection steps beyond exegesis into theological and political reflection on the unifying centre of Scripture: Jesus and his salvific activity.

There is no reason why this book should be read in order. Not even the first chapter need be read first by those who prefer to reflect on methodology only after observing it in action. The other chapters may be read in whatever order a reader's interests suggest. My only request is that readers try not to prejudge the political relevance of the various parts of the Bible. Open-minded readers of Scripture will always have challenging and stimulating surprises in store for them.

To keep the function of this book in perspective, it may be worth recalling a remark made by Charles Williams about understanding the book of Job. He pointed out that there are many commentaries and exegetical studies available, and in their absence even the book of Job itself could be consulted.<sup>1</sup> I hope that the following chapters will lead readers not away from the biblical text, but constantly back to it, and into closer engagement with it.

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## 1: Issues in Interpretation

In this chapter we shall discuss some of the most important hermeneutical issues that arise in applying the Bible to politics and formulate some principles for reading the Bible politically, before illustrating these principles in detailed examples of exegesis in subsequent chapters. We begin with one of the most crucial hermeneutical issues, which accounts for many differences between Christians on political matters: the relation between the Old and New Testaments.

### Varieties of Biblical Politics

Most readers of the Bible notice an obvious difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament in their treatment of political matters. On a superficial view, at least, the Old Testament seems to have much to say about politics, the New Testament rather little. However, this may be a misleading way of stating the difference, since it ignores the extent to which New Testament material which is not very explicitly political may nevertheless have political implications. It is not so easy to be non-political as some people think. The difference between the testaments might be better expressed in terms of a difference of political context. Much of the Old Testament is addressed to a people of God which was a political entity and for much of its history had at least some degree of political autonomy. The Old Testament is therefore directly concerned with the ordering of Israel's political life, the conduct of political affairs, the formulation of policies, the responsibilities of rulers as well as subjects, and so on. The New Testament is addressed to a politically powerless minority in the Roman Empire. Its overtly political material therefore largely concerns the responsibilities of citizens and subjects who, though they might occasionally hope to impress the governing authorities by prophetic witness (Matt. 10.18), had no ordinary means of political influence. Their only conceivable (though scarcely practical) route to political power would have been that of armed revolt, an option which they seem to have rejected.

This difference between the testaments explains why, from the time of Constantine onwards, whenever the political situation of Christians has moved towards more direct political influence and responsibility, the Old Testament has tended to play a larger part in Christian political thinking than the New Testament. This has been the case not only in the classic 'Christendom' situation of much of Western Christian history, where the confessedly Christian society bore an obvious resemblance to political Israel. It can also quite often be seen in situations where Christians have supported revolutionary movements and in modern pluralistic democracies. In the course of Christian history Old Testament law and precedent have been used to support an extraordinary variety of political institutions and policies: such as divine-right monarchy, crusades, redistribution of wealth, use of the death penalty, aid for the Third World, and royal authority over national churches. The Old Testament has been used to argue both the admissibility and the inadmissibility of female rulers, slavery and political assassination.

#### The Problem of Selectivity

One of the problems which the history of Christian political use of the Old Testament highlights is that of selectivity. Clearly Christians have always *selected* those elements of Old Testament teaching which they consider to have contemporary political relevance, and in different times and places they have selected different elements. The problem here is that this selection has all too often been governed by expedience rather than by any hermeneutical principle, and it has therefore been in danger of being an ideological manipulation of Scripture to support current principles and programmes. It can be very salutary for modern Christians to compare their own selective use of Old Testament material with that of their predecessors, and to ask whether they have any principles which justify the one over against the other. How many of those who freely quote the prophets' demands for social justice in favour of the poor and oppressed, while ignoring, for example, the prophets' demand, sometimes in the same breath (Ezek. 22.7-8; Amos 8.4-6), for sabbath observance, do so in the light of a hermeneutical *principle*? For nineteenth-century sabbatarians, support for legislation to enforce national sabbath observance had the same significance—in being a crucial issue of

Christian obedience in the political sphere—as concern for the unemployed or the Third World has for many Christians today. In Old Testament terms, at least, they had a point.

#### Dispensational Differences

When Christians are asked to explain why an Old Testament political provision should not, in their view, be applied to present-day political circumstances, they most often make one of two types of response. One is an appeal to a difference of cultural context: what made political sense in ancient Israelite society may not do so in modern technological society. This is a consideration which applies equally to the relevance of New Testament teaching and will be discussed later in the chapter. Alternatively, however, appeal may be made to a difference of 'dispensational' context: in other words, to the pre-Christian character of the Old Testament. It is here that the relation between the two testaments becomes a vital issue. In fact, this appeal can itself take two rather different forms:

1. It can be argued that New Testament ethics, say in the Sermon on the Mount, are an advance on Old Testament ethical teaching, which therefore becomes to some extent obsolete.
2. It can be argued that Old Testament Israel was in the unique position of being a theocratic state, and cannot therefore provide a political model for the New Testament era, in which God's people are not a political entity but scattered throughout the nations. (In passing, it may be noted that in fact the Old Testament itself faced the political issues of a diaspora people of God, and provided not only some guidance for Jewish subjects of pagan states (Jer. 29), but also examples of Jews exercising political authority or influence in pagan states: Joseph, Daniel and his friends, and Esther and Mordecai.)

Both these forms of argument are used, for example, to render Old Testament wars inapplicable as political precedents. On the basis of the first argument, Old Testament teaching on war is often said to be replaced by Jesus' ethic of non-violence. On the basis of the second, Israel's wars were holy wars, waged by God against his enemies, but modern states cannot claim such divine sanction for their wars.

We need to be clear that, though they both depend on the dispensational position of the Old Testament, these are two quite

different arguments. Both may have their place in a consideration of the biblical teaching on war. It is also worth noticing that both arguments involve us in another issue which we shall shortly take up: the relation between the people of God and the world. In the case of the first, if the argument is valid, we still need to know whether Jesus' ethic prohibits war only for Christian believers, or for secular states also. In the case of the second, we need to consider how far it is true that God governed his own people Israel on principles quite different from those he expects of other nations. Clearly the question of the modern relevance of Old Testament political material is a complex hermeneutical issue.

#### Using the Old Testament Today

In view of this complexity, some may be tempted to dismiss the political relevance of the Old Testament altogether. But there is a good reason for not doing so. God and his purposes for human life remain the same in both testaments, and it is primarily the character of God and his purposes for human life which are expressed in the political material of the Old Testament. They are expressed in forms appropriate to the specific conditions of Old Testament Israel: both the specific cultural context (or contexts) of a nation living in that time and place, and also the specific salvation-historical context of the national people of God in the period before the coming of Christ. This means that, while the law and the prophets cannot be *instructions* for our political life, they can be *instructive* for our political life. We cannot apply their teaching directly to ourselves, but from the way in which God expressed his character and purposes in the political life of Israel we may learn something of how they should be expressed in political life today.

This means that our first concern should not be to select those parts of the Old Testament which still apply today. None of it applies directly to us, as *instructions*, but all of it is relevant to us, as *instructive* (cf. 2 Tim. 3.16). Various aspects of Old Testament politics will prove instructive in different ways, as we consider both the differences and the similarities between their context, both cultural and salvation-historical, and ours. Not only analogous but also contrasting situations can be instructive. In every case we shall have to consider the salvation-historical context and relate the Old Testament material to the New Testament. The fundamental point about the relation between the testaments is not that in some

cases Old Testament provisions are superseded by the New Testament, while in other cases they are left unchanged. The fundamental point is that Jesus *fulfilled* the whole of the law and the prophets. None of the Old Testament can be unaffected by its fulfilment in Christ, but all of it, as fulfilled in Christ, remains instructive. We should not force this fulfilment in Christ into some artificial scheme (such as the traditional claim that Christ abrogated the civil and ceremonial law, but left the moral law in force), but should consider each part and aspect of the Old Testament in the light of Christ. The effect of doing this will take a wide variety of forms. We should also not forget that, just as we read the Old Testament in the light of its fulfilment in the New, so we must also read the New Testament against the background of the Old Testament, which it presupposes. In their political teaching, as in other matters, the two testaments supplement and inform each other.

#### Personal and Political Ethics

In addition to the question of the relation between the testaments, there are at least three other hermeneutical issues which constantly arise in considering the Bible's relevance to politics. These all affect our judgement about the extent of the biblical material that is relevant to modern politics. Has this or that passage something to say to our political life? 'No, because it is about personal ethics, not politics,' we sometimes say. Or: 'No, because it is about the social life of the Church, and cannot be applied to society outside the Church.' Or: 'No, because it applied to the particular cultural conditions of that time and cannot apply to our very different kind of society.' We need to look rather closely at these three sets of distinctions before we can decide what is and what is not politically relevant.

We begin with a hermeneutical principle which can be and has been used to render much biblical—especially New Testament—teaching irrelevant to political issues: the principle of a radical distinction between the ethical principles which apply to immediate personal relations and those which apply to political institutions and activities. According to this principle, the Sermon on the Mount would apply to a politician in her private life, but not in her public activity *qua* politician. An influential form of this view, though not its most extreme form, was held by Martin Luther. He pointed out, for example, that a judge who in his private life is

obliged to forgive personal injuries against himself and not to demand reparation is equally obliged in his public capacity as a judge to pass sentence on criminals and not to let them off without punishment.

Luther did not make the mistake of arguing that *wholly* different ethical principles apply in the private and the public spheres. He did not, for example, distinguish love as the principle of personal ethics from justice as the ethical principle of public life—a distinction not to be found in the Bible. On the contrary, Luther recognized that the command to love one's neighbour (on which, according to Matt. 22.40, the *political* requirements of the law and prophets depend) was the ethical principle of government as well as of private life. But love must take different forms in public and private life.

To some extent he had a valid point. When Jesus' ethical teaching becomes specific it is most often with reference to personal life. Matthew 5.38—42, for example, is not addressed to judges as judges, but to private individuals. But it is doubtful whether any sharp distinction can be drawn between public and private life in the way that Luther's principle seems to require. The individual is obliged to forgive personal injuries against himself, but this principle will not be enough to guide him in situations where the interests of several people are involved, where other people have been injured or need protection, or where (as a parent, for example) he has a responsibility for the moral education of the person who has done wrong. In such situations forgiveness becomes one duty of love among others. But then no radical difference occurs when we move into political situations. The principle of forgiveness does not become inapplicable, but needs to take appropriate forms in conjunction with other principles of love.

Thus we have the ordinary Christian ethical task of applying the principles of Jesus' teaching to all the varying situations of life, including the political ones. Of course they will not all apply in all situations (Matt. 5.27—8 will have little relevance to, say, the problem of the arms race), but they must simply be allowed to apply where they do apply. There should be no hermeneutical rule which excludes them from the political sphere.

#### **Ethics for the Church and for the World**

Another way of limiting the application of New Testament ethics can also be illustrated from the sixteenth century. Whereas Luther

drew a sharp distinction between the private and the public roles of the Christian, the Anabaptists drew a sharp distinction between Christians and others, the Church and the world. The ethics of the Sermon on the Mount, they claimed, govern the whole life of the Christian community but are irreconcilable with the tasks of governing a state, so Christians may not hold public office in the state. Political activity must be left to non-Christians, to whom the Sermon on the Mount is not addressed and of whom a different ethical standard is required. It should be noticed that the extent to which all citizens are implicated in the activities of government, for example by paying taxes, raised problems for this view even in the sixteenth century. In modern democracies the difficulties are greater.

It is one thing to say that Christians should have both the motivation and the spiritual resources to live better lives than others (cf. Matt. 5.46—8) and to realize the intentions of God for human community more perfectly in the Church than elsewhere. It is another thing to say that differing ethical principles apply to Christians and to others. It is hard to find biblical support for the latter.

This being so, it not only follows that the Sermon on the Mount requires political as well as other forms of implementation. It also follows that fundamental New Testament principles for life in the Christian community extend in principle to life in human community as such, and therefore have political relevance. This applies, for example, to Jesus' revolutionary principle of authority as service (Mark 10.42—5), Paul's principle of sexual and racial equality (Gal. 3.28), his effective abolition of the status of slave (Philem. 16), and his principle of equality of material possessions (2 Cor. 8.14). It is to the great credit of the early Anabaptists that they took some of these principles more seriously in their primary application to the Christian community than their Protestant contemporaries did, and they were able to do this because they maintained a clear distinction between the Church and the world. But such principles, once recognized, cannot be confined to the Church. This was seen, for example, by the nineteenth-century Evangelicals who worked to abolish slavery not only as a status within the Church but also as a condition sanctioned by the state. It is seen by South African Christians who realize that if apartheid is unjustifiable in the Church it is unjustifiable in the state and society too.

In extending New Testament principles of Christian community beyond the Church to political society we must take full account of the differences. Politics cannot do what the gospel and the Spirit can do, and politics cannot do in all societies what it can do in a society deeply influenced by Christian or other religious-ethical values. This is why the realization of those principles in the Church's life as a witness to the world must always be the Church's priority. But we should also remember that in some cases, such as sexual and material equality, the Church has had to be reminded of biblical principles by other people's witness to them.

#### Permanent Norms and Cultural Relativity

If the fundamentals of the human situation have not changed since biblical times, the conditions and forms of human society have—drastically. In modern society, whether democratic or totalitarian, industrialized or already moving towards the coming post-industrialized situation, government is a very different business from what it was for Deborah, Hezekiah or Pontius Pilate. Both its methods and its functions have necessarily changed and continue to change. This must be kept at the forefront of our minds in all attempts to make political use of the Bible. Otherwise naive absurdities will result. To argue, for example, that since education in biblical times was not a government responsibility it should nowadays be left purely to parental responsibility, as it was then, makes no more sense than to argue that in accordance with biblical precedent governments should not legislate for road safety. The functions of government are much more extensive now than in biblical times, not because governments have overstepped the biblically defined limits of their authority, but because of the vastly increased complexity of modern society. This at the same time makes different, more democratic forms of government both more practicable and more desirable than in ancient societies.

We need, therefore, to take a thoroughly historical attitude to this matter. The functions and forms of government are highly changeable features of human life (by their very nature they must be), and the Bible cannot therefore provide rigid norms for political institutions and methods in all periods of history. Moreover, a recognition of this is not foreign to the Bible's own view of government. Genesis does not, as we might expect, trace the exercise of political authority back to creation or the Fall, but

describes its emergence in the course of the historical development of human culture. Just as cities (Gen. 4.17), music (Gen. 4.21) and viticulture (Gen. 9.20) did not descend from heaven, but had thoroughly human origins, so government, in its most common Old Testament form of kingship, emerged with Nimrod: 'the first on earth to be a mighty man' (Gen. 10.8).<sup>1</sup> The portrayal of Nimrod as a hunter (Gen. 10.9), and as ruling an empire formed not by conquest but by colonization (Gen. 10.10–12), is significant, since it links Nimrod's rule with the human task of dominion on earth as given by God, after the Flood, to Noah (Gen. 9.1–7). This task was not in itself necessarily political, but took political form in Nimrod, who as a hunter protected his people from wild animals (cf. Gen. 9.2, 5) and as founder of a colonial empire fulfilled the command to fill the earth (Gen. 9.1). Thus according to Genesis, kingship, the rule of one man over a whole society, originated as a way of fulfilling these God-given human tasks, even if, as the beginning of Nimrod's empire in Babel indicates (Gen. 10.10; cf. 11.1–9), it may not have been an ideal way of fulfilling them. But it is then very important to notice that the functions of Nimrod's rule, which account for the origin of kingship, were *not* the functions of government as Old Testament Israel knew government in later periods. Nimrod's fame as a hunter (Gen. 10.9) preserves a memory of a very early period of human society, when one of the special duties of a king was to ward off and destroy the wild animals threatening his community. In the historical period of the Old Testament this original function of kingship was preserved in a purely conventional form: hunting was the favourite sport of kings in Egypt and Mesopotamia. But the king's hunting no longer had the vital, practical function of preserving the life of the community. Nor was the colonizing of uninhabited land a major function of government in the time of Old Testament Israel. Thus the functions of Nimrod's kingship were no longer the functions of kingship when Genesis was written. By describing in this form the origins of government, Genesis recognizes the thoroughly historical character of human government, how its functions must change and develop in relation to the changes and development of human society. Legitimate government must always reflect God's will for human life, as Nimrod's did the divine command to Noah, and the Bible's account of God's will for human life will therefore always be relevant to it, but *how* it reflects God's will for human life, and what aspects of

that will can appropriately be furthered by political institutions and methods, must change and can be discerned only in each new historical situation.

So we need to recognize that the political material in the Bible consists largely of stories about and instructions addressed to political societies very different from our own. I have sometimes wondered whether this is not part of the reason for the relatively modern tendency for many Christians to disengage from political and social reality. The adaptations needed to transfer biblical teaching on personal morality from its cultural situation to ours are comparatively easily made, but a more imaginative and creative hermeneutic is necessary for the Bible to speak to modern political life. Even when superficial parallels do strike us they can be highly problematic, as I discovered when leading studies on Joshua in a church house group at the time of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

The dilemma with which cultural relativity presents us is that the more specific the biblical material is in its application to its own historical context, the less relevant it seems to be in our context. Must we then look in the Bible only for permanent norms of a highly generalized character? This would be foreign to the nature of the Bible and would leave a great deal of it unusable, since the Bible is God's message in, to and through very particular historical situations. Its universality must be found *in and through* its particularity, not by peeling its particularity away until only a hard core of universality remains. So the appropriate method seems to be that of appreciating the biblical material first of all in its own culturally specific uniqueness, and then seeing it as a 'paradigm' (as Chris Wright suggests<sup>2</sup>) or an 'analogy' (as André Dumas suggests<sup>3</sup>) for our own time. In other words, the Bible provides models of God's purposes at work in particular political situations which can help us to discover and to implement his purposes in other situations. Such models, *because* they are highly specific, can often stimulate our thinking and imagination more effectively than very general principles can. For example, the law of gleaning in Leviticus 19.9–10 was appropriate only for a simple, agrarian society, but by observing how very appropriate it was as a means of provision for the poor in that society, we can be stimulated to think about forms of social legislation appropriate to our society. Of course we need always to consider such models in conjunction with the general principles that the Bible also provides.

However, the principles are fairly general and the models cannot

be blueprints. In a sense they leave us considerable freedom to work out for ourselves, under the guidance of the Spirit, how God's purposes for human life can be realized in our political life. But that is rather a negative way of putting it. Positively, they can *inspire* our own creative thinking about politics today.

That the Bible's teaching is culturally specific, in the sense that it addresses specific situations in ancient history, will be generally acknowledged. Rather more controversial is the claim that the Bible's political teaching is in some degree *conditioned* by the social and political context in which it arose. But it seems to me we must recognize this as part of the real humanity of Scripture. For example, the political wisdom of the book of Proverbs, with its emphasis on the stability of a fixed social order (Prov. 19.10; 30.21–3) and its sometimes deferentially uncritical attitude to the monarchy (Prov. 16.10–15; 25.3), reflects the outlook of the court circles from which it derives. This makes it not a mistaken but a *limited* viewpoint, and therefore one which needs to be balanced by other aspects of biblical teaching. In this case at least, the relativizing effect of its cultural background coincides with the relativizing effect of its occupying its particular place in the whole canon of Scripture. We shall have more to say about the hermeneutical significance of the canon shortly.

#### Text and Context

Finally, we turn to the principles involved in reading a biblical text within the relevant contexts for its correct understanding. Inevitably we shall be mainly concerned with general principles that apply to all biblical interpretation, but we shall bear in mind the particular needs of political interpretation.

The meaning of a text is dependent on its context. This is the key to all responsible interpretation of biblical texts. But 'context' has a variety of aspects:

1. There is *the linguistic context* of accepted meanings of words and idioms in the linguistic milieu in which the text was written and first read.
2. There is *the immediate literary context* of the literary unit in which the text belongs. (The unit will often be the biblical book of which the text is now part, e.g. Mark's Gospel, but it may sometimes be a smaller unit, e.g. a psalm, and sometimes a larger unit, e.g. 1–2 Chronicles.)



3. There is *the wider literary context* of literary genre, conventions, allusions and so on, within the tradition of literature to which the text belongs.

4. There is *the cultural context* of the kind of society—political, social, economic, religious—in which the text originated.

5. There is *the broad historical context* of current events which may be relevant to understanding the text.

6. There is *the immediate historical context* in the life of the writer or his circle which occasioned the text.

All these aspects belong to the 'original' context in which the text was written. But a text which goes on being read and valued long after it was written acquires new contexts. In the case of a biblical text, its original literary unit has been incorporated into several larger literary contexts. A psalm, for example, which may originally have been an isolated literary unit, became part of one of the smaller collections of psalms which were then put together to make our psalter. In the process it may have been edited, to make it suitable for use in the temple when the collection was made, and may have been given a title. Then the psalter itself became part of the Hebrew canon of Scripture, and that in turn part of the Christian Bible, in which the psalm may be quoted and interpreted by New Testament writers. Each of these broader literary contexts must affect its meaning.

Then there are the constantly changing historical, cultural, liturgical and theological contexts within which the psalm has been read and understood down to the present day, some of which still affect our reading of it. Its meaning for us depends, then, on its original context (so far as we may be aware of it), on its wider literary contexts in the canon (so far as we take these into account), on traditional contexts (such as its interpretation in a particular theological tradition or its traditional place in a liturgy) which may influence our understanding of it, and on the contemporary context within which we read it. What this contemporary context amounts to depends, of course, on the interpreter's particular relationships to the world in which he lives.

Evidently the meaning of a text must change as it is read in these various new contexts. It will lose dimensions of meaning which it had in its original context (since aspects of that context have been lost or forgotten) and it will gain new dimensions of meaning as it acquires new contexts. Nevertheless the task of

interpretation must presuppose that a constant (or at least recoverable) core of meaning persists and generates, in interaction with its new contexts, these new dimensions of meaning. Those who argue that the original context is irrelevant to a text's meaning for us should, logically, abandon the use of dictionaries and treat the Hebrew and Greek texts as mere meaningless marks on the page, to which they can give any meaning the shapes suggest to them! The historical nature of language itself requires us to give the original context a determinative role in the text's meaning for us. On the other hand, those who claim that a biblical text can legitimately mean only what it meant to its first readers need to be reminded of the way in which all great literature constantly transcends its original context and achieves fresh relevance to new situations.

#### Expanding Meaning

A brief example (not irrelevant to politics) may illustrate the way a biblical text can acquire new dimensions of meaning. Humanity's God-given dominion over the rest of the animals (Gen. 1.26, 28) must, for its first readers, have had a fairly restricted meaning, referring to their taming, hunting and farming of animals. In fact in Old Testament times the language of Genesis 1.26, which speaks of human dominion over all animals, must have seemed hyperbolic to anyone who thought about it, since many animals were not, in any realistic sense, under human dominion. (The writer of Job 39.2–12 certainly realized this.) In the context of its own literary unit, the book of Genesis, the text receives a kind of exposition in the account of Noah's relations with the animals, which again suggests a more far-reaching dominion than was the actual experience of Old Testament people. Then in the context of the Hebrew Bible, the thought of Genesis 1.26 is made, in Psalm 8.4–8, the basis for praise of God ('What is man that thou art mindful of him? . . . Yet thou hast made him little less than God'), with the implication that human dominion over the animals is to be exercised to the glory of God. The New Testament passage Hebrews 2.8 then gives the idea a christological significance, seeing Jesus as the man who will fully realize the ideal of human dominion over creation.

Both of these inner-canonical interpretations are relevant to the fresh extension of meaning which Genesis 1.26 has gained in our own time, when humanity has become so dominant as to threaten

the very survival of much of the animal creation. Applying the text to this new situation, which could not have been envisaged by its author, is not a distortion, but a natural extension, of the text's 'core' meaning. Indeed, the open-ended language of the text really comes into its own only in modern times, when at last it is literally true that scarcely a species on earth can escape the effects of human activities. In this new situation it is clear that humanity, in its dominance on earth, incurs new responsibilities, such as the preservation of endangered species, which the first readers of Genesis 1.26, because of the restricted realization of their dominion, did not have. But precisely in this new situation, continuity with the original meaning of the text gains fresh importance, since this ensures that 'dominion' refers to responsible, not exploitative, rule, on the model of God's own care for his creation. I am surprised that Noah has not become, as he deserves to be, a model for Christian conservationists!

If a biblical text is not to mean whatever we want it to mean, we must pay disciplined attention to its original and canonical contexts. But if it is to mean something for us, we must pay equally disciplined attention to the contemporary context in which we interpret it.

#### Pre-Canonical Contexts

The term 'pre-canonical contexts' is really preferable to 'original context', because, as the example of a psalm (given above) illustrates, many biblical passages in fact passed through a series of historical contexts before entering the canon. Much biblical material existed first as oral tradition and/or passed through several stages of written compilation and editing before reaching its present form. The 'original' context is not always discoverable nor always the most important for our understanding of the text. To understand a psalm as originally composed may be less important than to understand it as part of the collection of temple hymns. A good rule of thumb (not to be applied without exceptions) is to take the present form of a biblical book as the primary context for exegesis, but to take account of the previous history of the materials contained in it in so far as these earlier contexts remain significant for understanding the material in the context of the biblical book. For example, the prophetic books of the Old Testament are edited collections of prophetic oracles, intended as such not for the prophet's contemporaries but for later readers.

But the relevance of the original context of these oracles is preserved within their later context, because the very nature of the oracles, which are often dated and address identifiable historical situations at the time of utterance, makes it impossible to ignore their original context.

To interpret the text in its pre-canonical contexts, the well-known methods of historical exegesis apply and must be rigorously applied. No exceptions must be allowed to the principle that the historical meaning of the text must be a meaning which readers at that time could perceive. Since the 'core meaning' of the text, which persists in all new contexts, must be contained in this historical meaning, this principle gives the task of achieving relative objectivity in historical exegesis a key role in preserving all interpretation from uncontrolled subjectivity. All new dimensions of meaning which a text may later acquire must be intelligibly continuous with a meaning accessible to readers of the text in its pre-canonical contexts.

Thus, for example, the medieval political exegesis of Luke 22.38, according to which the two swords represent the ecclesiastical and civil authorities of Christendom, is unacceptable because it has no basis in a meaning which could have been discovered by the first readers of the text.

#### The Canonical Context

The final context which is *authoritative* for the meaning of a biblical text is the complete canon of Scripture. We cannot be content to read a text as its pre-canonical readers read it, but must also read it in the context of the whole biblical story of God's dealings with his people and the overriding theological and moral themes of the Bible. This does not mean a harmonistic levelling out of the diversity and distinctiveness of the various parts of Scripture, because the canonical context is not a substitute for, but is additional to the pre-canonical contexts. It does mean that we must think about the relative significance of the various parts of the canon, and recognize that some viewpoints within Scripture are relativized or even corrected by others. It means appreciating that the unity of the canon sometimes emerges in dialectical fashion from the diversity of the canon. It involves us in constant interaction between understanding particular texts in their primary contexts and attempting a biblical theology which does justice to the whole canon.

### The Contemporary Context

There are several dangers involved in the task of interpreting the text in the context of our contemporary world. One is the danger of manipulating the text to support our preconceived attitudes and projects. This is an often unconscious temptation in the political use of the Bible, since biblical authority can sometimes be a very useful source of justification for political policies and since we often find it difficult to be self-critical about our own political attitudes. To allow the Bible to challenge and change our political attitudes is harder than we perhaps realize.

Disciplined listening to the text in its original and canonical contexts is one protection against this danger. Of course, historical exegesis is never *wholly* objective, but the rigorous attempt at historical objectivity can liberate us from all kinds of misuse of the text. So can serious attention to the place of the text within the canon. Ideological abuse of Romans 13.1-7 to support the status quo can be corrected by reference to passages critical of unjust government. Study of the history of interpretation can also be helpful, since historical distance enables us to appreciate what was going on in the Church's political use of the Bible in the past more easily than we can in the present. For example, the nineteenth-century use of the Bible to justify slavery, even by so eminent a theologian as Charles Hodge,<sup>4</sup> is a salutary warning, which needs to be heeded especially where the interests of the interpreter's own class or nation are at stake in the interpretation of Scripture.

The peril of blindness to the influence of our interests on interpretation can also be countered by attention to the work of interpreters whose political and economic circumstances are different from our own. American black slaves read the Bible very differently from the way their masters read it. Today it is important that we listen to the liberation theologians of the Third World and that we try to hear how the Bible sounds to Christians persecuted by oppressive regimes. Of course we must recognize that revolutionary interpretations of Scripture can be as ideological as interpretations by those in power, just as feminist interpretations can be as ideological as patriarchal interpretations. But we have a duty to listen to anyone who claims that the Bible has been misused against them and to anyone whose interpretation of Scripture goes hand in hand with costly discipleship of Christ.

All this reminds us that in the end the task of contextualizing

Scripture today is the task of the whole Church, and must take place in the dialogue between Christians whose varied cultures, conditions and Christian traditions can alert them to aspects of Scripture which others may miss. Much discussion of contextualization has been about the different forms which Christianity should take within particular cultures today, and of course this is important. But at a time when the most urgent political issues are the international ones affecting all parts of the world, our political use of the Bible needs to reflect the thinking of the universal Church.

Another danger in relating the Bible to contemporary situations is that of too simplistic application. There are two antidotes to this. One is, again, careful study of the texts in their historical context, which will alert us to the real differences between that context and the modern one. Second, the more we realize how biblical texts relate to the actual social structures and economic conditions of their time, the more we shall see the need to engage in serious analysis of our contemporary world if we are to specify the Bible's relevance to it. Too often Christians concerned about social justice have imagined that Amos's critique of eighth-century Israel needs only a little adjustment to apply to our own society. But this is often cheap relevance, which evades the need for proper analysis of and prophetic insight into the actual evils of our society.

This last observation prompts us to notice, finally, that the Bible's meaning for today cannot result automatically from the correct use of a set of hermeneutical principles. It requires in the interpreters qualities of insight, imagination, critical judgement, and expert knowledge of the contemporary world. It also requires the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who inspired not the mere text but the contextual meaning of the text, and therefore remains active at the interface between the text and its changing contexts.

# 10: The Political Christ

## A Concluding Reflection

Jesus Christ is the centre of the canon of Scripture. All the themes of Scripture converge on him and find their final and fullest significance with reference to him. All Christian study of Scripture must constantly return to him if it is to read Scripture correctly. So can we read, not just certain passages of the Gospels, but Jesus himself politically? To interpret Jesus and his significance in purely political terms would be to reduce Jesus. But we should also be reducing Jesus if we were to exclude the political dimension of his life and fate. Because the Kingdom of God he served embraces the whole of human life, and because he identified in love with human beings whose lives were affected by political structures and policies, his mission impinged on the political along with other dimensions of life. Politics, as we have observed a number of times, is not everything; nor is the political dimension a watertight, autonomous sphere of life; it interacts with all other dimensions of life. Thus we may expect to find that Jesus' life, death and resurrection, while not reducible to politics, have a political dimension.

### The Praxis of Jesus

Jesus in his ministry proclaimed the coming Kingdom of God and practised its presence. That is, he anticipated the future hope of the unrestricted, uncontested sovereignty of God, by extending God's rule in the present and inviting people to live within it. This was not the Kingdom of God in its fullest, eschatological sense, but it was a preliminary presence of the Kingdom within history. Preliminary, because it made itself felt in relation to evil and suffering and death, triumphing over them but not yet eliminating them from the world. But a real presence of the Kingdom, because in Jesus' praxis the characteristics of God's rule could be identified. In summary, the rule of God as Jesus' praxis embodied it was the sovereignty of God's gracious and fatherly love. In more detail, it was:

- in relation to demonic oppression, conquest;
- in relation to misrepresentation of God's rule, sharp rebuke;
- in relation to selfish complacency, warning;
- in relation to sin and failure, forgiveness and assurance of love;
- in relation to sickness, healing;
- in relation to material need, provision of daily bread;
- in relation to exclusion, welcoming inclusion;
- in relation to desire for power, an example of humble and loving service;
- in relation to death, life;
- in relation to false peace, painful division, but in relation to enmity, reconciliation.

These general characteristics—not an exhaustive list—are gathered from the stories and the sayings in the Gospels, which are themselves the irreplaceable indications of the nature of God's Kingdom.

The key to the way that Jesus actualized God's rule is his loving identification with people.<sup>1</sup> As the Son of God his Father, who himself lived out of his experience of his Father's love, Jesus was able to bring God's love powerfully to bear on people's lives. But this could not happen in a purely generalizing way, by preaching an indiscriminate message of God's benevolence towards everyone. God's love through Jesus reached people in their actual, very different life-situations, because Jesus in love identified with people, understood and felt their problems and needs. Only so could God's love reach into and change their lives. While he practised God's universal love for all people, Jesus could do so only by constantly particularizing it as God's love for this or that person in his or her particular situation.

This means that, on the one hand, Jesus' loving identification with people knew no limits, but, on the other hand, he did not identify with everyone in the same way. It is important to keep these two sides of the coin in mind. In the first place, Jesus' love excluded no one. He held aloof neither from the outcasts of society nor from the respectable people who were scandalized by the company he kept. He dined with tax-collectors and sinners, but also with Pharisees. The recipients of his healing included the blind beggar Bartimaeus, a Samaritan leper, the servant of a Roman centurion, and a slave of the high priest sent to arrest him. He raised from the dead not only the son of the widow of Nain,

who without male relatives lacked all economic support, but also the daughter of the no doubt well-to-do Jairus, whose grief was not to be despised because of his social importance. Jesus' disciples and loyal friends included the partners in a small fishing business, a tax-collector, a former demoniac, the wife of Herod's estate manager, and a wealthy aristocrat. Even Jesus' highly critical confrontations with religious leaders do not fall outside his loving solidarity with all people: they were the only way he could bring home to such people the character and demands of God's love as it impinged on their particular situation. Thus Jesus' loving identification crossed all barriers and reached people in all the varieties of the human condition, people divided by all the differences—physical, social, economic, political—which divide people into sexes, classes, races, ages, states of health and so on.

However, it is equally important to notice, secondly, that Jesus did not identify with all these people in the same way. He met their actual, very different needs for God's solidarity with them as they themselves were. He touched and healed lepers. He found the rich young ruler a good and upright person, and for that reason asked him to give his wealth to the poor. He refused to condemn the woman taken in adultery, but was unrestrained in his attacks on the Pharisees. In considering how Jesus particularized God's love in different ways for different people, there are three aspects of special relevance to our political concern.

In the first place, Jesus made no artificial distinctions between the dimensions of human life and had no rigid policy of reaching people in one or other dimension of life, but appreciated people's life-situation as a whole and acted appropriately. The healing of lepers well illustrates the point. By healing the disease Jesus changed the life of a leper in many dimensions. Since leprosy entailed isolation from the rest of society, both because of the contagious nature of the disease and also because of the ritual uncleanness involved, restoration to physical health brought with it restoration to the social and religious community. By risking ritual defilement and *touching* a leper, Jesus expressed his healing not only of disease but also of human community. Moreover, at least in the case of those, like the Samaritan leper, who responded with recognition and gratitude to God, what Jesus mediated through the healing action, with its physical, social and economic effects, was a fresh experience of God's love, which encompassed all dimensions of life. But if the point of entry, so to speak, for

God's love in the case of lepers was physical healing, for the Samaritan woman, to take a different example, it was elsewhere: initially in Jesus' crossing the barriers of social superiority which separated men from women and Jews from Samaritans, subsequently in his bringing to the surface the woman's failure in married life.

Second, although Jesus certainly met people as individuals, he also appreciated the extent to which they belonged to specific social groups. Some of the people Jesus met emerge as individuals in the gospel stories, some remain for us representatives of social groups, which the Gospels also mention in general terms as groups with which Jesus associated: tax-collectors, disabled beggars, lepers, Sadducees, prostitutes, the rich, the poor, and so on. What life was like for a member of any of these groups was very considerably determined by his or her membership of that group, and so Jesus' loving identification with people had to include his awareness of their place in the social and economic structures of first-century Palestine. God's love would not be fully particularized if it reached a tax-collector simply as a tax-collector, and not as *this* tax-collector, Zacchaeus or Levi; but, on the other hand, it could not reach Zacchaeus or Levi without taking full account of his being a tax-collector. Thus politics, which deals with structures and social groups more than with individuals as individuals, has a place in our discipleship of Jesus. It cannot fully implement Jesus' particular concern for each individual he met, but it can be a vehicle for his concern for people as members of social groups whose lives are shaped by the structures of society.

Third, it is in this context of Jesus' loving identification with all in different ways that we must consider the claim that Jesus' praxis displayed a *preferential* concern for the poor. It would be better to speak of Jesus' special concern for the marginalized, those who were excluded from society to a greater or lesser degree, since by no means all these people were economically poor. Tax-collectors most certainly were not, and indeed their despised position in society was partly because they had grown rich, by dubious means, at others' expense. Yet they were prominent among those with whom Jesus was notorious for associating. The key to Jesus' 'preference' for various groups must be their relative exclusion, for social, economic and religious reasons, from the society of God's people. Thus, he treated women, who were very much second-class citizens in Jewish society of the time, with

exceptional respect, implicitly acknowledging their full and equal status in Israel. People whose permanent physical handicaps reduced them to beggary and pushed them to the social and economic margins of society were prominent among the people he healed. But he also made friends with the moral outcasts—tax-collectors and prostitutes—making a special point, by accepting hospitality and sharing meals, of including them in the social bonds of the renewed Israel as he envisaged it. In his deliberate attempt to reach those who were shunned and forgotten by everyone else, he sought out the most hopeless cases of all: the lepers, whom society treated as more or less already corpses, and the demoniacs, whose condition seemed virtually to exclude them from humanity altogether.

Jesus' special concern for the marginalized people was not a neglect of others. Rather, Jesus' mission was to reach all with God's loving solidarity and thereby create loving solidarity among all. But for this purpose his special concern had to be the inclusion of those who were excluded from human solidarity and those who felt excluded from God's solidarity. Those who excluded others from the solidarity of God's people could properly learn God's solidarity with themselves only along with his solidarity with the people they excluded. Not only for the sake of the tax-collectors and sinners, then, but actually also for the sake of the Pharisees, Jesus identified himself with tax-collectors and sinners.

Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God, provisionally present in a fragmentary way through his ministry, was of a society without the privilege and status which favour some and exclude others. Thus those who had no status in society as it was then constituted were given a conspicuous place in society as God's rule was reconstituting it through Jesus. This ensured that the rich and the privileged could find their place only alongside the poor and the underprivileged. The last became first and the first became last so that there should be no status or privilege at all. Similarly, in a society where righteousness was treated by some as a status which privileged them and excluded others, Jesus made it clear that notorious sinners, who could make no claim to righteous status, had a rightful place in the Kingdom of God's forgiving grace. Those who considered themselves righteous could then take their place only by abandoning the privilege of righteousness in the solidarity of grace. Finally, Jesus, who loved children, made a small child his model of citizenship in God's Kingdom, because

children had no social status. To enter the Kingdom, all must become like the little child. Like his preference for children, Jesus' preference for the tax-collectors and the beggars was not against the others, but for them. The others must abandon status in order with Jesus to enter the solidarity of the unrighteous, the poor and the children. There was no other route to the Kingdom of God in which no one is less than or thinks himself more than a neighbour to all others.

### The Cross of Jesus

Crucifixion was a common fate in the ancient world. Yet it is a remarkable fact that the gospel narratives of *Jesus'* crucifixion are the longest, most detailed *accounts* of a crucifixion which can be found in ancient literature.<sup>2</sup> Ancient writers usually refer to crucifixion only in passing, rarely dwelling on the details, and many authors who should have had occasion to refer to it avoid mentioning it at all.

It is worth pondering the reasons for this neglect. In the first place, crucifixion was regarded as the most horrible way to die: a form of execution deliberately made as painful as possible, an excruciatingly slow death, exposed to public shame and mockery. The cultured, literary world wanted nothing to do with it. Not that they wanted it abolished: they took it for granted that this most cruel of judicial sanctions was essential as a deterrent to maintain civilized society. But they put it out of mind, lest it spoil the image of Roman civilization as humane and beneficent. They engaged in a kind of double-think characteristic of many societies: on the one hand, propagating and really believing in an idealized picture of their society as the home of civilized values, while, on the other hand, knowing that this civilization is kept in being by a system of torture and terror. Crucifixion was and had to be offensively public. So much the more resolutely was it banished from the literature and culture in which the Roman Empire celebrated its glory. Great generals like Julius Caesar, great provincial governors like Pliny, who regularly ordered crucifixions, wrote up their memoirs with never a mention of the fact. It was not what they wished to remember or be remembered for.

However, a second reason why ancient literature rarely dwelt on crucifixion reinforces the first: the people who were crucified were not people who mattered. Crucifixion was for the lower classes, foreigners, slaves. It was the penalty for political crimes against

the state, for violent robbery, and for rebellious slaves. It maintained the authority of the state and the structure of a slave-owning society. It secured peace and prosperity for the majority by barbarous treatment of others. Crucifixion could be forgotten precisely because it was a way of forgetting people, a way of excluding from society those who would disturb its conscience or its security, a way of denying humanity to the 'others', a way of reducing their humanity to carrion.

The illusion of a civilized society had to be maintained by forgetting its victims. Crucifixion was the way of removing them, rendering them nothing; and so that they might be well and truly forgotten, crucifixion itself was not discussed. Hence the peculiar offensiveness of the Christian message of Jesus the crucified God: a God who suffered execution like a rebel or a slave, a God who was one of the victims who do not matter and ought to be forgotten. Such a God was not only ridiculous, but brutally offensive: he assaulted the illusions of Roman society head-on.

In his crucifixion Jesus identified himself unequivocally and finally with the victims. He suffered their fate of being made nothing in order to restore their humanity as people who are something. He joined the forgotten, but he himself and the story of his crucifixion were remembered. Roman society and the Roman state tried hard to suppress the memory of this crucified man as they suppressed the memory of others, but in his case they failed. His crucifixion has become the best-known fact of Roman history. He is remembered, and his solidarity with all the forgotten victims brings them to remembrance too.

Jesus could have avoided suffering, but in obedience to his mission of communicating God's love he chose the path which inevitably made him one of the victims. As such he suffered in the same way as many others. Stripped of all human dignity, exhausted by continuous pain, helpless before his executioners and the jeering onlookers, deserted by friends and by his God, Jesus was reduced to sheer victim. Yet his suffering did not, as suffering often does, turn him in on himself and deprive him of the spiritual strength to be concerned for others. On the contrary, his loving concern reached all the people around him as he hung dying: his fellow victims on the crosses beside him, his mother in her grief, even his executioners, for whom he prayed forgiveness. Because he suffered out of love and loved in his suffering, the crucified Jesus was God's loving solidarity with all who suffer victimization.

Of course, it is of central importance to the Christian gospel that the crucified Jesus died in loving solidarity with all of us, the executioner and the bystander as well as the victim. On the cross he meets us all in the final truth of the human condition as such: our condemnation, failure, suffering and mortality. But it is also important that he died a victim of a political system. We must not give his death a meaning which is indifferent to the processes and structures by which some human beings make victims of others. We must not forget that his loving solidarity with all made him a victim with some at the hands of others. It is as one of the victims that in his love he reaches all of us.

For those of us who are not ourselves victims, that means that Jesus cannot be rightly remembered today without bringing to remembrance also his fellow victims in the world today. He requires us to see the world from their perspective, renouncing the comfortable perspectives of societies which have so many ways of leaving people to suffer, excluding and forgetting them. His solidarity with the victim forbids us to ignore the sufferings of the forgotten victims, and forbids us also to distort their sufferings by means of self-justifying illusions. The pretence, for example, that the imposition of suffering on some people is worthwhile for the sake of the greater good of the rest of us cannot survive the disillusioning effect of Jesus' cross. By insisting that we remember the victims and adopt their perspective, it exposes for what they are all the terrible ideologies—of right, left and centre—which justify suffering: 'of course' progress has its victims, 'of course' the weak will go to the wall, 'of course' the defence of our society will cause innocent suffering, 'of course' the price of the revolution will be innocent suffering. Any ideology which encourages us to ignore or to minimize the sufferings of some in the interests of others is forbidden us by the cross. The crucified God is always with the victims, even with the victims of the victims.

### **The Resurrection of Jesus**

During his ministry Jesus took up, in proclamation and practice, many of the prophetic hopes of the Old Testament. In a preliminary way the expectations of a time when God's rule would prevail against all evil and suffering were being actualized. But the culmination of the prophetic hopes was the hope for the resurrection of the dead, the hope that God would triumph even over 'the last enemy' death in a new creation no longer subject to

mortality. This was the furthest conceivable extent of God's rule, and so the hope of resurrection included and represented all the Old Testament promises for the future. The significance of Jesus' resurrection, therefore, was as a kind of breakthrough to the eschatological Kingdom, to that final condition of the world which is God's perfect will for his creation. The fragmentary anticipations of the Kingdom in Jesus' ministry were surpassed by this entry into glory, beyond all evil, suffering and death. But, of course, it was Jesus only who entered the glory of the new creation, one man as pioneer for the rest. His resurrection was God's definitive promise of the resurrection of others and of the Kingdom of glory into which all creation will be assumed.

The risen Jesus is our future. He beckons us forward to the goal of creation and gives all Christian activity the character of hopeful movement into the future which God has promised. Not that we ourselves can achieve that future. Resurrection makes that clear: we who ourselves end in death cannot achieve the new creation out of death. The Kingdom in its final glory lies beyond the reach of our history, in the hands of the God who interrupted our history by raising Jesus from death. This transcendence of the Kingdom beyond our achievement must be remembered. But in Jesus God has given us the Kingdom not only as hope for the final future but also to anticipate in the present. As the vision of God's perfect will for his creation it is the inspiration of all Christian efforts to change the world for the better. In relation to our political activity, it is a double-edged sword, cutting through both our pretensions and our excuses. On the one hand, as the goal we do not reach, it passes judgement on all our political projects and achievements, forbids us the dangerous utopian illusion of having paradise within our grasp, keeps us human, realistic, humble and dissatisfied. On the other hand, as the goal we must anticipate, it lures us on beyond all our political achievements, forbids us disillusioned resignation to the status quo, keeps us dissatisfied, hopeful, imaginative, and open to new possibilities.

However, Christian hope, founded on the resurrection of Jesus, is also hope that has been interrupted by the cross of Jesus and re-established only as hope for the victims with whom the crucified Jesus was identified. The progress which creates victims and the progress which leaves the victims behind have nothing to do with the Kingdom of God as Jesus defines it. Only in solidarity with the victims can his future be our future.

## Notes

### Introduction

- 1 Quoted in R. McAfee Brown, *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p. 163.

### Chapter 1

- 1 See C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1984), pp. 514-18.
- 2 C. J. H. Wright, *Living as the People of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), pp. 40-5.
- 3 A. Dumas, *Political Theology and the Life of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1978), pp. 68-9.
- 4 There is a useful discussion in W. M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1983), chapter 1.

### Chapter 2

- 1 J. Morgenstern, 'The Decalogue of the Holiness Code', *Hebrew Union College Annual* 26 (1955), p. 12.
- 2 This list is from D. Patrick, *Old Testament Law* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 162. Morgenstern, 'Decalogue', attempts, with only limited success, to show that the original core of the chapter was a decalogue related to, but not identical with, the Decalogue.
- 3 For this paragraph, see Patrick, *Old Testament Law*, pp. 198-200.
- 4 C. J. H. Wright, *Living as the People of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), pp. 51-9.
- 5 J. V. Taylor, *Enough is Enough* (London: SCM Press, 1975), p. 51.
- 6 See G. J. Wenham, 'Leviticus 27.2-8 and the Price of Slaves', *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 90 (1978), pp. 264-5.
- 7 I borrow the phrase from *Changing Britain: Social Diversity and Moral Unity: A Study for the Board for Social Responsibility* (London: Church House, 1987), chapter 4, which is a useful discussion of the task.
- 8 The translation, 'damages must be paid', is uncertain, but makes good sense in the context. It was suggested by E. A. Speiser, *Oriental and Biblical Studies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1967), pp. 128-31, and adopted by M. Noth, *Leviticus* (Old Testament Library; London: SCM Press, 1977), p. 143, and G. J.



## BOOK REVIEW

*The Bible in Politics: How to read the Bible politically*, by Richard Bauckham. London, SPCK 1989. x + 166 pp. £6.95.

We cannot always begin at the beginning. Books on "The Bible and . . ." cannot be expected always to tell us *why* we should be particularly concerned with the Bible as opposed to any other book. At the same time, with no current consensus to appeal to, some kind of markers are important. Reductionist accounts of Scripture such as Denis Nineham's *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, whilst still current in some circles, are increasingly seen to be inadequate to the way in which Scripture does actually operate within the Christian community. In Solentiname and thousands of base communities in the Third World the Bible does in fact function as a primary source for reflection and action within the contemporary situation. At the other end of the spectrum Barth's Prolegomena, continuingly fertile though they are, are also somehow untrue to experience. The "100% Word of Man" is swallowed up by the "100% Word of God". It simply is not the case that *every* word of Scripture can meet us as "a boulder on our path" as Barth claims. Learning more from Barth's exegetical practice than from his doctrine of Scripture, George Lindbeck reminds us that a religion gives us our world, so that, for Christians, it is our immersion in Scripture which gives us our perspective on reality. Rather than reading Scripture with the spectacles of modernity, we read modernity with the spectacles of Scripture (though this is of course to say that Scripture itself is a form of modernity). It seems clear that this is what is actually happening in the base communities in a way that, incidentally, changes our understanding of the famous 'priority of praxis'. All praxis emerges from an understanding of the world, and this is given to the Christian by her reading of Scripture. Where does *The Bible in Politics* fit in to these various understandings of Scripture? Bauckham's book sets out to help us to see how to interpret the Bible politically and consists of a series of rather divergent reflections based on different Scriptural passages, books, or themes. Five chapters take the form of an exegesis of Scripture, but the passages dealt with are chosen for the way in which they illustrate particular themes – the relevance of the Old Testament for ethical discussion, attitudes to the powerful and the oppressed, taxation (and therefore the State) and the warning to complacent churches sounded in Revelation 18. Two further chapters look at the Book of Esther and its relevance for understanding the Holocaust and the Flood story as a means of reflecting on the possibility of nuclear annihilation. There is a useful discussion of the theme of freedom in the Bible, and a concluding chapter reflects on the political Christ. There is much that is instructive

in Bauckham's discussion, but it does not offer us an overall vision of how the discipline of reading Scripture or, what will be nearer many Christians' experience, hearing two or three readings on Sunday mornings, helps us to think and act politically. Bauckham's concern is to show people how one might move without anachronism between the political societies of biblical times and the very different societies of today. If Lindbeck is right, however, reading the Bible politically is less a matter of coming from a particular text to our day, or from a particular contemporary problem to a suitable biblical text (which seems to me to be Bauckham's emphasis), but in allowing our vision of reality to be shaped by Scripture, thereby acquiring values which determine our political choices. Bauckham suggests this in his distinction between finding 'instructions' in the 'Old' Testament on the one hand, which we cannot do, and finding it 'instructive' on the other, which we can. (Is it not high time, by the way, that we followed the example of Dutch scholars like van Iersel in speaking of the 'First' and 'Second' rather than the 'Old' and 'New' Testaments as a way of avoiding the value judgements entailed in the traditional usage?). Bauckham argues that the First Testament instructs us by providing models of God's purposes at work in particular political situations in ancient Israel which can help us to discover God's purposes in our own day. This might suggest that in a Bible study, say, we should put the question: "Now what can we learn from this passage for our situation?" If I understand Lindbeck correctly, on the other hand, his suggestion would be that it is our ongoing reading of Scripture together, as Church, which, in Bauckham's words, inspires our creative thinking about politics today.

One of the most creative writers in this area in the past thirty years has been Jacques Ellul, and he has warned repeatedly against the reduction of the biblical message to banal platitudes. Bauckham does not entirely escape this danger. The study of Leviticus 19 reveals that respect for the old calls for adequate pension schemes, Proverbs 31 teaches us that we should care for the marginalized and be prepared to learn from secular sources, and Revelation 18 that our worship of consumerism is a trafficking in human lives. Do we need the Bible to tell us this? The best biblical exegesis, in my experience – one thinks of Ellul's *Politics of God and Politics of Man*, for example, or the long exegeses in Church Dogmatics IV/2 and 3 – is always disturbing, exciting, challenging, and uncomfortable. There is a sense that we are told what we cannot tell ourselves, and this disturbing element has a prophetic bearing on the contemporary situation. It is no disparagement of Bauckham to say that with this book we are still in the playground of the theologians. Often he has illuminating discussions of particular points – for instance of the two stories of the Temple tax and the tribute to Caesar, which he understands as illustrating Jesus' objection to Zealot theocracy and acknowledging, in the case of the tribute, that Caesar had legitimate rights. Referring the story to 1 Chron. 26.32, with its

distinction between the things of God and the things of the King is certainly interesting, but not conclusive. The Davidic monarch, after all, was not any old king, not a representative of "kings in general", and very different indeed from Caesar. "Render to Caesar" might also be an ironic challenge to those who are supposed to know the law to remember what the law actually insists on, namely that "The Earth is the Lord's and all that is in it".

A thread running throughout the book is the insistence, important in these days of renewed assertion of the two kingdoms theory by the New Right, that the political dimension is not autonomous, but interacts with all other dimensions of life. This is illustrated especially with respect to Jesus, who in his ministry made no distinctions between different dimensions of human life, in his death died as the representative of all victims, and in his resurrection constituted the church as a *cor inquietum* in the midst of human society. But is not the hermeneutical equivalent of the two kingdoms theory to bring the Bible, on one hand, to meet our situation on the other? And is not the hermeneutical equivalent of the recognition that all life inextricably meshes together – personal, political, sexual, religious – the further recognition that, as Christians, we only understand the personal, political, sexual and religious at all in and through the Scriptural story which gives us our world in the first place? And if that is the case do we not have a somewhat different answer to the question how we read the Bible politically?

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## BOOK REVIEW

*Theological Politics: a critique of 'Faith in the City'*, by Nigel Biggar. Oxford, Latimer House, 1988. 85 pp. £3.

This is a most interesting theological critique of *Faith in the City*, the report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Urban Priority Area Commission. Nigel Biggar takes the report to task for not attending sufficiently to the central business of the church, which is the exposition of its faith: *Faith in the City* lacks a good enough theological rationale for its message. Biggar, unlike some commentators from the evangelical stable, clearly believes that the church has a right and a duty to enter the world of politics and even to make specific recommendations about what needs to be done. Indeed, I have the distinct feeling that he may share many of the comments and the proposals which are made in the report. However, he is looking for a tighter, more biblical and more deductive approach, for want of which he finds the report's views on the poor, its notion of justice and its understanding of community all lacking. I found his comments on the last of these topics the least satisfactory part of his thesis, doing nothing to relieve the subject of its vagueness. Certainly, 'community' caused ACUPA problems, but there is little here that might have helped sort them out.

I have some sympathy with the critique made by this monograph. The greatness of *Faith in the City* lay less in its theological weight and more in its prophetic character. It said the right word at the right time, and has influenced both church and society in its wake. It was not a major statement of Christian theology. My problem, however, is with Biggar's unrealistic expectations of reports of this nature. Twenty people of several disciplines, gathered round the table to wrestle with the pain and crisis of British urban life, can be expected to say some sharp things. They root their concern in their own spirituality, their corporate worship and their Christian intuitions. We should not expect them to produce substantial theological comment in the traditional sense. This is the way in which Biggar and the theological community can help with the task, by setting the prophetic concerns of the report in the context of contemporary theological reasoning. The point of such reports is to set people working, including professional theologians. Biggar's remarks are more pertinent as a response to the challenge they have issued than as a criticism that they did not do his work for him.

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