

## CHAPTER 2

# Scripture: New Testament

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Those who go to the Bible expecting an unambiguous message on the issue of politics need to recall William Blake's witty aphorism: "Both read the Bible day and night / But thou readst black where I read white" (*The Everlasting Gospel*, 1808). That is a salutary reminder to anyone embarking on a consideration of "what the Bible says" on any subject (Barr 1980). In different social and historical contexts, different texts have been used. Thus, with the emergence of Christendom after the conversion of Constantine, an understanding of Christian polity became more tied up with the task of Christianizing society. There was a corresponding diminution of the stark contrast between God and Caesar in history and political arrangements which had applied before the fourth century. Charting these two perspectives would involve describing the complex oscillations between accommodation and separation, between God and Caesar. Different texts have been used to justify these positions. An "accommodationist" position would tend to focus on Romans 13 and read the gospels in the light of that text, as was done, for example in the *Alternative Service Book* (1980) of the Church of England, in the readings for Pentecost 15. A stark contrast appears between the "accommodationist" and "separatist" positions if one reads the New Testament through the lens of the Apocalypse and gives primacy to the teaching and example of Jesus, who fell foul of the colonial power. Accommodation and separatism are nowhere better seen than in the sixteenth century in the contrasting use of scripture by the magisterial reformers and the early Anabaptists.

Rather than going straight to the biblical texts (cf. O'Donovan 1996), therefore, a context for the interpretation of the contours of an emerging Christian politics in the pages of the New Testament will be suggested here on the basis of early Christian practice, as far as it can be reconstructed from pre-Constantinian sources. The reason for taking this approach is that such early Christian practice is the major witness to the ways in which the scriptures were interpreted. A characteristic strand of that early practice expresses itself in a

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continuing interplay between "contraries": difference from the surrounding order and living within it; continuity with the Jewish tradition and yet radical departure from it; and the tension between the reality of the continuity of this age and the taste of the age to come.

This will be followed by a much later writer's interpretation of key New Testament texts. The choice of John Milton's treatise on *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* is not arbitrary. First, it was written in a situation in which there was the widest divide between the divine and the human kingdoms. As such, it offers an example of biblical interpretation which echoes the sentiments of pre-Constantinian Christianity. Second, Milton offers examples of the interpretation of key Christian texts such as Matt. 22: 15–22 and Rom. 13. 1–10 as part of his argument against those who would claim scriptural authority for a view of human society in which the divine monarch is replicated in human affairs. Milton's text, therefore, offers an opportunity to watch an interpreter at work in a clearly understood context; and a context, moreover, that has a close analogy with the situation of pre-Constantinian Christianity. In the light of the sketch of the interpretive context of earliest Christianity, with its clear prioritization of obedience to God rather than Caesar in private and public life, and a consideration of the scriptures which stresses the critical difference between the divine and human polities, we will consider the Gospel accounts of Jesus' prophetic proclamation of God's kingdom and the ethical challenge it presented to early Christians, and the indications of their engagement with that challenge.

Both pre-Constantinian Christianity and Milton's *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* exemplify the stark contrast between God's kingdom and the kingdoms of this world which is characteristic of so much of the New Testament. The contrast between this age and the age to come, the present and the future, and between what is and what should be, is a thread which runs through the New Testament and which gives that collection of writings its peculiar theological power. Such a conviction lies at the heart of Christian belief and accentuates the qualitative difference between present and future downplaying the sufficiency of all present political arrangements. This tension, or dialectic, in various forms has been characteristic of Christian political theology down the centuries.

### Pre-Constantinian Christianity's Emerging Political Identity

Despite the different strands in scripture, the position taken in this essay is that the main elements of Christian identity, as exemplified in what we can discover about the practice of pre-Constantinian Christianity, and recalled and practiced by minorities within the Christian churches down the centuries, are nonconformist and based on the principle that "we must obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5: 29; and see further Bradstock and Rowland 2001). The subversive character of the nascent Christian movement was early recog-

nized by outsiders who, hearing that Christians were proclaiming "another Jesus" and acting against the decrees of Caesar, accused them of "turning the world upside down" (Acts 17: 6; see Hill 1972).

Emerging Christianity before the fourth century CE was characterized by such a counter-cultural, even sectarian, spirit. At the heart of the baptismal experience was the clear message of a transfer from one dominion to another, involving the acceptance of Jesus Christ as king of kings and lord of lords. What is so striking about the New Testament texts is that they were written by people who had little or no political power, with a vision of the world which was at odds with the prevailing ideology. The many indications of impatience with the status quo and way of living in the world. Not drawn from one particular race or background, Christians were a different sort of people, committed to a different kind of life and culture, more often than not (until the time of Constantine) at odds with the wisdom and politics of the age. Once it became the religion of the rulers, its inclusive rhetoric could easily be used to serve rather different ends. The radical slogan of Galatians 3: 28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female," has a rather different ring when uttered to serve as the "social glue" of an inclusive, cosmopolitan and eventually fragmenting empire.

The emerging pattern of existence in early Christianity, diverse though it undoubtedly was, is characterized by the martyr spirit (in the strict sense of the word). That is not to say that persecution was widespread, but difference and the distinctiveness of lifestyle and practice were. The acts of the Christian martyrs (Musurillo 1972; Lane Fox 1986; Boyarin 1999) are testimony to this distinctiveness, and it was a pattern which was basic to later exemplifications of Christian minorities. Politically, these were people who were not neatly integrated into Greco-Roman society. Because of their allegiance to Jesus, the early Christians were known as members of a superstition, a deviation from the norms of accepted behavior. The New Testament is the collection of documents of a marginal group. Joining the Christian community meant conversion to a position in society which was at odds with its values, nowhere better exemplified than in the conversion accounts in Justin Martyr (First Apology 14) and Cyprian (First Letter to Donatus 3; Kreider 1995). From the position of discomfort, persecution, oppression and minority status throughout history, Christian people have found that biblical texts have resonated with their lives and led them to positions at odds with society. In the face of growing accommodation between the values of God and Caesar, monastic asceticism made its appearance in the desert of Egypt. Originally a hermit-like existence, it evolved into communities of heaven on earth. This way of life threw into the sharpest possible relief the growing worldliness of the churches. There was an emphasis on manual work alternating with prayer and reflection. The solitary voices in the wilderness grew into an integral part of church and society, prompting their own renewal movements in the later Middle Ages pioneered by people like Bernard of Clairvaux and Francis of Assisi, who in their turn sought to recapture the original vision of Jesus and exemplify its political character in communities of perfection (Garnsey

and Humfress 2001; Lane Fox 1987; Rousseau Pachomius 1985; Kreider 2001).

The roots of this alternative, counter-cultural, political identity are fundamental for interpreting Christianity's foundation documents as they would have been understood by the Christians of the first centuries. Baptismal liturgies stressed the different character of the citizenship involved in being a member of this new "race." It meant deliverance from the demonic world which controlled the values of the world at large, values which Christians deemed antithetical to human flourishing (Justin First Apology 14). The catechumenate and baptism were part of a process of inculturation into a very different political culture. Paul sketches it in Romans 12, writing of the renewal of the mind and the offering of living sacrifices. For some this was literally true, as the martyr narratives testify. Martyrdom, however, was not extraordinary but at the end of a continuum which saw Christians engaged in a public demonstration of a different political ethos, in which Christ, not Caesar, was Lord (Phil. 2; Rev. 19: 16). That alternative political practice was supported by practical and administrative arrangements manifested in networks of communication and mutual support. The latter in particular embodied an alternative polity which could be seen at the local level (Justin Apology I 65–7) and internationally (Paul's collection for the poor in Jerusalem being the earliest and most remarkable example of this, e.g. Rom. 15: 25; 2 Cor. 8–9).

### **The Contrast between God and Caesar: John Milton's *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649)**

In a situation where human monarchy had become so flawed that it had to be resisted and removed in the search for a better kingdom, John Milton (1608–74) explains the extraordinary events of 1649 which saw the execution of the English monarch. Writing at this time of upheaval, Milton rejected the royalists' interpretation of certain biblical passages as a defense of human monarchy and its oppressive consequences. Milton is one of the foremost advocates of an understanding of Christian politics which reflects those radical, nonconformist instincts. He began writing *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (Dzelzainis 1991) during King Charles's trial but completed and published it after his execution. It is a text which is explicitly contextual and, as such, differs in several key respects from the line taken by some of Milton's radical contemporaries like Lilburne and Winstanley. Milton argues the case for the right to execute a tyrant, but also the more radical case for popular sovereignty based on an original social and governmental compact that ensures the people's right to choose and change their governments as they see fit. It is a manifesto of those who value religious liberty and a "free commonwealth" without monarchy or aristocracy. Milton was one of the foremost apologists of nonconformity. In *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* we find passages from the Hebrew Bible treated to support the bibli-

cal attitude to monarchy, which is then taken further with an examination of famous passages connected with Christianity and royal power (Matt. 22 and Rom. 13: 1 ff.). The work offers a thoroughgoing interaction with major scripture passages which may often be mentioned in passing in other radical or reformist writings, and to which interpreters return again and again down the centuries (Dzelzainis 1991).

In his consideration of Matt. 17: 24–7, Milton points to the fact that if, on the authority of Christ, Peter was a child of God, and therefore free, so also are contemporary Christians and citizens. Turning to Matt. 22: 16–21, he points to Christ's response: To ask for the coin and ask whose image is thereon. The image becomes the basis for a defense of human dignity and the basis of prime responsibility to God:

if upon beholding the face and countenance of a man, someone would ask whose image is that, would not any one freely reply that it was God's. Since then we belong to God, that is we are truly free, and on that account to be rendered to God alone, surely we cannot, without sin and in fact the greatest sacrilege, hand ourselves over in slavery to Caesar, that is to a man, and especially one who is unjust, wicked and tyrannical?

In similar vein Milton interprets the concluding saying of Jesus as a summons to humanity to recognize the limits of their obligation:

Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and the things that are God's to God. . . . who does not know that those things which belong to the people should be given back to the people? So not all things are Caesar's. Our liberty is not Caesar's, but is a birthday gift from God. To give back to any Caesar what we did not receive from him would be the most base and unworthy of the origin of man.

Like some modern commentators, Milton demands that we take seriously the context in which the question about the payment of taxes to Caesar was asked (especially Luke 20: 20). Christ wanted not so much to remind us "so obscurely and ambiguously of our duty towards kings or Caesars, as to prove the wickedness and malice of the hypocritical Pharisees."

In contrast to the Israelites who kept – like all the nations – asking for a king, Christ had demanded something different: "you know the princes of the nations are rulers over them" (Matt. 20: 25–7). So that Christian people should not ask for a ruler, like the other nations, Christ warned, "among you it will not be so." There will not be "this proud rule of kings." There is to be none of the "spin" of the "great and the good" who "are called by the plausible title of Benefactors." Milton here draws on the variant version of the saying in Luke, possibly addressed to a community where there was a putative elite: "whoever wishes to become great among you (and who is greater than a prince?) let him be your attendant; and whoever wishes to be first or prince let him be your slave" (Luke 22: 25; Wengst 1985: 103). A Christian king, therefore, is the servant of the

people: "But a king will either be no Christian at all, or will be the slave of all. If he clearly wants to be a master, he cannot at the same time be a Christian."

Addressing at 1 Pet. 2: 13–15 the most explicit summons to subordination in the New Testament, Milton stresses the importance of taking the context of the apostle's advice seriously: "Peter wrote this not only for private persons, but also for the strangers [1 Peter 1.1 f.] who were scattered and dispersed throughout most of Asia Minor, who in those places where they were living had no right except that of hospitality." He demands consideration of the root meaning of the verb "be subject." King and governor are appointed by God to punish wrongdoers and praise those who act well, which is the will of God. The basis for this precept is given in 1 Pet. 2: 16: one does this "as free men" – therefore not as slaves. Monarchy and government in their various particulars are said to be human institutions. So if rulers rule with torture and destruction of the good, and praise and reward of wrongdoers, human power should be used to appoint what is good and advantageous for men and women, and remove what is bad and destructive.

Similarly, when he considers Romans 13, Milton refuses to allow that Paul is setting Nero or any other tyrant above all law and punishment. Milton attends to context and points to the difficult situation at the time of writing: "At that time there spread about people's gossip exposing the apostles as rebels and insurrectionists, as if they did and said everything to overthrow the common law." The time of writing of Romans reflects a more ordered and just period of governance either under Claudius or the early years of Nero, which were not tyrannical. God prescribes the establishment of magistrates, but the precise form of the governance is a human creation. Such human, political arrangements of God's ordinance for order in society will be faulty because they are from men or even the devil. According to Milton, something that is faulty and disorderly cannot be ordained by God. Without magistracy no human life can exist; but if any magistracy acts in a fashion contrary to one who supports the good, it cannot be properly ordained by God. In that situation subjection is not demanded, and sensible resistance may be contemplated, "for we will not be resisting the power of a magistrate but a robber, a tyrant or an enemy." Subjection is not required in every circumstance, therefore, "but only with the addition of a reason, the reason which is added will be the true rule of our subjection: when we are not subjects under that reason, we are rebels; when we are subjects without that reason, we are slaves and cowards."

In the approaches he takes to the New Testament passages Milton anticipates more recent interpreters (Belo 1981; Clevenot 1985; Wengst 1985), including the authors of the *Kairos Document* (1985), a biblical and theological comment on the political crisis in apartheid South Africa. The authors of the *Kairos Document* reject the idea that Paul presents an absolute doctrine about the state, and argue that the text must be interpreted in its context, which was a situation in which some Christians believed that they were freed from obeying the state because Christ alone was their king (in other words, they were anarchists). Paul insists on the necessity of some kind of state, but that does not mean that all the state does is approved of by God. When a state does not obey the law of

God and becomes a servant of Satan, it is passages like Rev. 13 to which one should turn instead.

### The Four Gospels: Jesus, Prophet and Embodiment of the Kingdom of God

According to Mark's Gospel, Jesus of Nazareth preached the reign of God and thus oriented his heaven to that alternative horizon which Jewish eschatological hopes had kept in view (as is evident from texts like 4Q 521 from the Dead Sea Scrolls; see Vermes 1995: 244). Present political and social arrangements were not the norm, therefore. The imminent arrival of the messianic age heralded new priorities and broadened horizons (Luke 4: 16; Matt. 11: 2 ff.). Political authority in Jerusalem was in fact wielded by the priestly aristocracy and the Judean ruling class. The fact that the challenge is against this group rather than the Romans is merely indicative of the locus of political power. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus challenges a culture of status and customary practice and institutions. In 10: 42 the disciples want to sit and rule, but are offered only baptism and a cup of suffering.

God's kingdom was the major theme of Jesus' proclamation, exemplified in acts of power and compassion to the disadvantaged and in riddling challenges to hearers through the parables. The frequent designation of him by his followers as Messiah, the anointed and expected king who would bring peace, prosperity, and justice as heralded by the prophecy of Isaiah (Isa. 11), continued that biblical tradition. Despite the attachment to David and the dynasty, exemplified in Psalms 89 and 132, there is throughout the scriptures an ambivalence towards monarchy. On occasion this can take the form of antimonarchical sentiments (1 Sam. 8). In the books of Kings the activities of the Davidic dynasty are a catalogue of misdeeds and iniquity which ultimately puts the whole dynasty in jeopardy. The Torah hardly contemplates monarchy with equanimity (Deut. 17: 14 ff.). Its vision of society is of a community which, if not exactly egalitarian, works according to a vision of social intercourse in which injustice is corrected, whether through the cancellation of debts (Deut. 15) or the Jubilee (Lev. 25, though even here the exigencies of the "real world" demand some kind of dilution of the ideal). Monarchy involved military power and the oppression of the people in the name of expansion, a fact of life in Solomon's reign, ruefully reflected in the law of the king in Deuteronomy 17. It demanded centralization, achieved in the reign of David and Solomon by the creation of a new capital at the Jebusite city of Jerusalem. That center was given ideological justification when the portable ark was sited there and, under Solomon, a temple built to house it and act as a demonstrable sight of God's presence with Israel.

The prophets criticized the distortions of the understanding of divine righteousness. The outsiders Amos and Jeremiah paid the penalty for their contumacious condemnation of false prophecy and of the complacent delusions of

grandeur and safety which religion gave to the political establishment in Jerusalem. Israel's reflection on its God and its politics involved recognition that settlement in the land was a mixed blessing. Not only is there nostalgia for the time before arrival in the Promised Land (Hosea) but there is also a frank recognition that settlement meant accommodation with a very different culture, the culture of Canaan, which was an expression of the aspirations of a settled, rather than migrant, people with a severely puritanical culture. The prophets cut isolated figures (e.g. 1 Kgs. 18; Isa. 20), protesting against the dominant thrust of their nation's life, particularly its idolatry and departure from the norms of social justice as set out in the ancestral traditions. The prophets are true radicals, objecting to the modernizing tendencies of their day, the compromises with the lifestyle and values of the surrounding culture, and looking back to the roots of the nation's life (e.g. Hosea 2: 14).

In his words about the kingdom of God or kingdom of heaven, Jesus never offers his hearers a detailed description of it. Instead, he uses stories and sayings to prompt hearers (and also the later readers of his sayings in the Gospels) to think and behave differently, to repent and believe in the good news of the kingdom of God (Mark 1: 15). The Gospels are full of challenges to conventional wisdom about monarchy. Jesus is presented as a humble king (Matt. 21: 5), in contrast with Herod who is no true king of the Jews (2: 2). Herod slaughters the innocents (2: 16 ff.), whereas the true king reacts positively to children (18: 2; 19: 14; 20: 31). Those who are pronounced blessed share the characteristics of this humble king (5: 3 ff.), who engaged in acts of compassion and healing which affect crowds rather than leaders (9: 36; 14: 14; 15: 32). Final judgement (25: 31 ff.) is based on response to the hidden Son of Man in the destitute lot of his brethren (cf. 7: 21 ff; 10: 42 f.), who will be revealed as in some sense identified with "the least" at the moment of "apocalypse" on the Last Day.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus articulates a redefined understanding of kingship. This king is one who washes his disciples' feet. Jesus' reply to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world," is not a statement about the location of God's kingdom but concerns the origin of the inspiration for Jesus' view of the kingdom. Its norms are the result of God's spirit and righteousness. It is otherworldly only in the sense that it is wrong to suppose that the definition of kingship and kingdom is to be found in conventional regal persons and practice.

John the Baptist and Jesus, however, were both hailed as figures in the tradition of the prophets (Matt. 16: 17 f., 23: 26 ff.). Indeed, John was seen as an embodiment of Elijah's own person (Luke 1: 76; Matt. 11: 13). Like their contemporaries who suffered at the hands of the colonial power (e.g. Josephus, Jewish War vi. 281 ff. and 301 ff.; Antiquities xviii. 55 ff.; xx. 97 ff., 167 ff., 185 ff.; Goodman 1987; Gray 1993), they were thorns in the flesh of those in power. John, according to the Jewish writer Josephus, was suspected of fomenting revolution (Antiquities xviii. 116 f.), and that seems to have been the attitude toward Jesus on the part of the hierarchy in Jerusalem, who feared Roman reprisals if Jesus were allowed to go on behaving as he was (John 11: 49). Indeed,

in Mark's Gospel Jesus' action in the temple was the last straw which persuaded the authorities to assassinate him. Prophecy is no mere ecclesial office offering occasional admonition or pious platitudes. Like Jeremiah, the prophet must utter prophecies over many "nations, races, languages and kings" (Rev. 10: 11; cf. Jer. 1: 10) and be prepared to pay the price of so doing (Rev. 11: 7; cf. Mark 13: 9 ff.). It is not a specialist vocation, but that to which the church as a whole is called (Bauckham 1993). The continuation of that prophetic task is a central part of the life of the church whose role, like that of Jeremiah and John of Patmos, is to prophesy about many peoples and nations, and to discern the beast and the Babylon in the midst of inhumane actions (whether that be trade or economic life in general) which afflict human lives (Rev. 18: 13; and see further O'Donovan 1996: 11, 62 ff.).

To claim that the New Testament offers complete homogeneity in the way in which God and Caesar interrelate would be to ignore many contradictory strands. These are well represented in Luke-Acts. Familiar passages in Luke's Gospel suggest a different perspective from the conventional: the insignificant Mary and Jesus' birth in obscurity; John's social teaching (3: 10 ff.); the anointing by the prostitute (7: 36 ff.; cf. Mark 14: 3 ff.); the women followers and supporters (8: 2 f.; 13: 10; 23: 27; 23: 49, 55); Samaritans (10: 25 ff.; 17: 11); the concern with the "prodigals" (15: 1 ff.) – all these in different ways "flesh out" the manifesto which Luke's Jesus offers (once again peculiar to this Gospel) in 4: 16. On the other hand, other texts in Luke offer a rather different slant. For example, Luke's version of the Last Supper includes sayings of Jesus at this point, some of which have parallels in other Gospels. One in particular is instructive. In their teaching on discipleship, Mark and Luke respectively have Jesus telling his disciples:

#### Mark

You know that among the gentiles the recognized rulers lord it over their subjects, and the great make their authority felt. It shall not be so among you; among you, whoever wants to be great must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all. For the son of man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

#### Luke

Among the gentiles kings lord it over their subjects, and those in authority are given the title Benefactor. Not so with you: on the contrary, the greatest among you must bear himself like the youngest, the one who rules like one who serves. For who is greater – the one who sits at table or the servant who waits upon him? Surely the one who sits at table. Yet I am among you like a servant.

A comparison of these two passages reveals that Mark has a general "whoever wants to be first" whereas Luke has "the greatest" and "the one who rules." It has plausibly been suggested that unlike in Mark's community, Luke knew that the Christians he was addressing included persons of relatively high standing in society. No longer does the Christian community consist of the poor Jewish

Christians to whom Paul's churches sent their money and support. As in the church in Corinth there were some, perhaps even a significant number, alongside those who were not powerful or of noble birth, who needed to understand their responsibilities as disciples of one who came to preach good news to the poor.

Elsewhere, there are nods in the direction of accommodation, particularly in Acts. Ananias' and Sapphira's sin is deceiving the Holy Spirit rather than refusal to share their property, perhaps a tacit move away from the practice of the earliest church in Jerusalem. Zacchaeus does not have to sell all his goods. The ambiguity is nowhere more evident than in Luke 16, where the utter repudiation of Mammon and the disparagement of Dives sit uneasily with assertions that one has to use the Mammon of unrighteousness in order to be considered worthy of heaven. According to Acts 10, the account of Cornelius' conversion leaves open the question of the character of life of the newly converted gentile soldier – quite a remarkable omission, given that in the following century there was widespread doubt about whether a Christian should sign up for military service (Hornus 1980). Luke–Acts was probably written to churches that were relatively affluent. They had tasted of the good news of justification by faith and life in the Spirit, and needed to be reminded that there was more to faith than mere religion; and, most important of all, Luke wanted them to take seriously “the option for the poor” (Esler 1986).

### **“It shall not be so with you”: Life in Jerusalem and Babylon**

The most uncompromising rejection of the exercise of state power and accommodation with its culture in the New Testament is to be found in the book of Revelation. Its clearly enunciated choice between the Beast and Christ, and Jerusalem and Babylon, represent the character of the early Christian political ethos. The challenge to the complacent, and the word of encouragement to the hard-pressed, stand side by side in a book which unmasks the reality of power and the fallibility of human benevolence. In many ways it offers one of the most penetrating accounts of the church's relationship to the state, and in so doing offers a pungent warning to the kind of cosy accommodation into which churches have allowed themselves to slide. In its stark contrast between the Lamb and the Beast, between the Bride, New Jerusalem, and Babylon, it juxtaposes the choices facing men and women and reminds followers of the Lamb of the dangers of becoming entangled in a political system based on a completely different set of values. What is particularly disturbing is the ruthless questioning of the motives behind the benevolence of the powerful. The deceit that snares practitioners and gullible recipients alike is frightening. The remedy is simple. It involves an exodus and a resistance to joining in life as usual, because that means complicity with the culture of Babylon. One must refuse to join in, choose

to contradict, resist, and prophesy against the way the world is ordered. Christian life according to the Apocalypse means embracing the role of the outsider (Wengst 1985; Rowland 1998).

It is in the light of this analysis that we should view the two texts which have become the bedrock of discussions of Christianity and politics: Mark 12: 13–17 (and parallels) and Romans 13. With regard to the former, as Milton correctly pointed out, the context of the saying is one where Jesus is being put to the test by his opponents. This is especially clear in the introduction to Luke's version: “so they watched Jesus and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor” (Luke 20: 20; cf. 23: 2). It is no surprise that Jesus gives an ambiguous ruling. In a situation which demanded circumspection, Jesus offered an enigmatic riddle in a situation where he had been put in a tight corner by his opponents. It is a politically acute answer with which those who have found themselves in similar tight corners would readily identify. It exemplifies the kinds of strategy which those in situations of subjugation articulate: the gesture; the coded response; and the witty aphorism which avoids giving offense. Dominated people do not always comply, and even when they mouth the acceptable words favored by the powerful, manage to subvert their apparent compliance with it (Scott 1985; Boyarin 1999: 44–6).

With regard to Romans 13, any interpretation must begin with the preceding chapter, in which Paul offers an outline of Christian polity centering on the renewal of the mind and the demonstration of this change in lives lived sacrificially. This is the norm for what is good and how the good may be achieved. Paul's expectation of Christ's coming and his lordship, expressed throughout the letters, is the necessary context within which the permanence and rightness of any political regime, however enlightened, should be judged. Like Daniel in the court of Nebuchadnezzar, Paul accepts that God has a time and season for every power. The principalities and powers to whom Christians are urged to be subject are part of Christ's triumphal procession (Col. 2: 14). The public demonstration of the way of the Messiah, however, is still to come, “when God will be all in all” (1 Cor. 15: 25). What is offered in Romans 13 is advice for the interim, and a goal for the powers to implement if they would reflect the goodness of God. Insofar as they fail to do this, or interpret the good as what serves their own interests, they undermine the obligation laid upon those in subjection, so carefully enunciated in these verses. Insofar as most political regimes fall short of the goodness of God, subservience and acquiescence are bound to be heavily qualified, as Milton rightly perceived (“an evil and faulty thing, since it is disorderly, cannot possibly be ordained”). Where the early Christian writings part company with Milton, however, is that Daniel, Paul, and the Christian martyrs do not contemplate their witness to the ways of Christ leading them to armed revolt, but instead to the burning fiery furnace or the arena, where the public, political, demonstration of “the better way” would be offered to probably incredulous spectators.

## Conclusion

One can look at the pages of the New Testament and find in the synoptic Gospels, the letter of James and the book of Revelation that indomitable, uncompromising spirit which set itself against the values of the present age. Such clear-cut counter-cultural strands are, as has already been suggested, a common feature of early Christian texts. Yet, as the Pauline letters indicate, the new converts, particularly those in the urban environment of the cities of the Empire, had to learn a degree of accommodation with the world as it was, without, somehow, abandoning the stark call to discipleship of the teacher from Nazareth. What is remarkable about the letters of Paul, however, is the way in which this Christian activist maintained the counter-cultural identity of these isolated groups by his traveling and writing. The strange thing about Paul is that the energetic innovator and founder of the gentile church should have been the one who above all sowed the seeds of the acceptability of the world order as it is and passivity toward it. Nevertheless, as a recent study has reminded us, there is at the heart of this emerging Christian church a distinctive identity in which elite goods and privileges (wealth, power, holiness, and knowledge) ceased merely to be the prerogative of an elite and came to be accessible to all within the common life of the Christian communities (Theissen 1999: 81–118). It comes as no surprise, therefore, that in the history of Christianity many have often looked to the radical Paul as a basis for appeals for change, as the examples of Augustine, Martin Luther, and Karl Barth indicate.

Tensions certainly exist both among the New Testament documents, and, in the case of some writings, within the same document. Such a tension between what was politically and theologically possible and what needed to be held on to, to be heeded whenever possible within the severe constraints posed by historical circumstances, is part of the story of Christian radicalism. Some were more inventive than others in the ways in which they dealt with this conundrum. There were martyrs who brooked no compromise, or found there was no alternative but to die for their faith. But there were those who sought the freedom within the status quo to pursue their goals. In many ways their ingenuity and their knack for survival bespeaks of that same divine spark that kept the faith alive in the early years of the Christian church. Such were the ways to maintain the commitment to Christ's kingdom in the midst of the political and economic order of an age which demanded compromise.

The picture we have of early Christianity from the sources is a "sectarian" picture which sits uncomfortably with all that we hold dear. From the position of discomfort, persecution, oppression, and minority status, Christian people found that the Bible resonated with their lives. For all their protestations of loyalty to the emperor, they refused to conform to the demands of empire. For them there was another king: Jesus. They looked forward to the time when to him every knee would bow. There could be no compromise between God and

Caesar. Allegiance to the resurrected Christ meant that in any conflict of loyalty the nation-state had to take second place to the pearl of great price which those who confessed Jesus as Lord had discovered.

The eschatological hope of God's kingdom on earth which is such a dominant thread in New Testament theology cannot allow any easy accommodation between the church, the community of those called to bear witness to the reign of God, and political powers. While still living in an age which is passing away, the church is bound to have to make choices about its involvement and participation, based on its assessment of the extent to which, in whole and in part, the kingdoms of this world manifest the way of the Messiah. This is a complicated process in which one might expect significant differences of opinion. But when that wrestling with the issues is carried out in a situation where integration into a political system is a continuing datum, the chances of critical awareness are dramatically diminished and the dangers of being used to baptize social, political and economic systems which are far from reflecting the righteousness of God are increased.

The contrast between Caesar and Christ pervaded early Christian discourse. Thus when Polycarp was brought before the local governor, he refused to swear an oath to the emperor, or burn a pinch of incense to Caesar. In the legends surrounding his death the crowds condemned him as the "destroyer of our gods, who is teaching the whole multitudes to abstain from sacrificing to them or worshipping them" (Martyrdom of Polycarp 10–12). A neutral, apparently secular, action is an event of supreme importance in the eyes of God. The redemptive moment means siding with the Lamb at the moment of testimony, and standing firm in one's convictions and commitment to the horizon of hope symbolized by the Lamb who bears the marks of slaughter. In this respect John's apocalyptic vision is typical of early Christian political understanding. It offers hope to those who stand firm against the insidious blandishments of a decaying culture. The Apocalypse reminds readers of the ultimate character of apparently harmless actions. The odd bit of compromise with the old order is nothing less than being marked by the Beast. All action, however small, is ultimately significant and of infinite value in the divine economy.

In the ordinary situations of life in the present there exist a challenge, a threat, and an opportunity to discover the hidden life of God. The scriptures mix the mundane and the heavenly to convey the deeper character of what it is they seek to communicate. We see this most clearly in Matt. 25: 31 ff., with the subtle relationship between the eschatological judge and his hidden presence in the least of his "brethren" in the midst of the present age: the consequence for final judgment is now being gestated in the womb of history. This is true of the Bible as a whole. All of life is an issue for the religious person, from eating to buying, words and deeds as well as what is narrowly regarded as worship. There is no area of existence which is neutral and unaffected by religious significance. This link between the public and the private, the spiritual and political, which Christianity inherited from Judaism has become a central element of catholic Christianity down the centuries.

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## CHAPTER 3 Augustine

Jean Bethke Elshtain

The fate of St. Augustine in the world of political theology has been mixed. He is a thinker of great discursive power who favors powerful narration over deductive systematicity. What is "political" about his theology must, for the most part, be teased out. He never penned a specific treatise on the subject. Despite this, it is fair to say that more words have been spilled on figuring out what an Augustinian political theology is, or might be, than on the tomes of other, more explicit, political theologians. There are particular features to St. Augustine's work that make him a tough nut to crack. From the time of his conversion to Catholic Christianity in 386 to his death as Bishop of Hippo in 430, Augustine wrote some 117 books. He touches on all the central themes of Christian theology and Christian life: the nature of God and human persons, the problem of evil, free will and determinism, war and human aggression, the bases of social life and political order, church doctrine, Christian vocations: the list is nigh endless.

Although a number of his works follow an argumentative line in the manner most often favored by those who write political treatises, especially so given the distinctly juridical or legalistic cast of so much modern political theory and political theology, most often he paints bold strokes on a broad canvas. His enterprise is at once theological, philosophical, historical, cultural, and rhetorical. His works are characterized by an extraordinarily rich surface as well as vast depth, making it difficult to get a handle on if one's own purposes are not so ambitious. He traffics in what we generally call "universals," but he is also a nuanced "particularist" and historicist.

Given this towering enterprise it is, perhaps, unsurprising that attempts have been made to reduce Augustine to manageable size. To that end he has been tagged a political realist and canonized, if you will, as the theological grandfather of a school of thought called "Christian realism" but, as well, of a tradition that includes Machiavelli and Hobbes. For thinkers in the political realism camp, most of whom are not theological thinkers, Augustine, if he is read at all, is read primarily in and through excerpts from his great works that most favorably comport with this "political realism." To this end, his *Confessions* are ignored and book XIX