

## THE BIBLE AS A POLITICAL DOCUMENT<sup>1</sup>

By JAMES BARR, M.A., B.D., F.B.A.

REGIUS PROFESSOR OF HEBREW IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

THIS lecture is not a work of exact biblical scholarship : it will not seek to prove, with precise exegetical detail, what the Bible had to say about politics. Nor is it a work of positive and constructive theology, seeking to declare what the message of the Bible for political life may be. Nor, again, is it a work of exact historical scholarship—for which the lecturer, needless to say, would be very ill qualified—that would endeavour to survey what the political effects and the political impact of the Bible throughout history have been. My purpose is much more inexact and impressionistic. I want to isolate and identify a variety of political images that the Bible seems, at various times and in the eyes of various societies, to have projected, images of social and political organization therefore that have seemed to people, rightly or wrongly, to have derived from the Bible or at least to be consonant with the Bible ; and, in relation to each of these images, I want to consider from what stratum of biblical thinking it derives and to what extent, if any, it is justified when seen against the actual intentions of that particular stratum of the Bible. For, as I have already implied, the Bible does not project one unitary political image or message, but several different images and messages are, at least *prima facie*, derivable from it. And therefore it may seem worth while to look at the diversity of these images. In this sense I am seeking, not to validate any image or message by precise exegetical confirmation, but to construct a rather loose or vague typology of such images, which may then enable us to classify and interpret the diversity of the political effects which the Bible seems to have exercised.

The question might well be asked why I am doing this at all, and the answer to this question will help to launch us into our investigation. I pose the question of the Bible as a political document because of my special interests as an Old Testament scholar. For, as I shall show, the Old Testament has often been

<sup>1</sup> A Ludwig Mond Lecture delivered in the University of Manchester on the 14th of February 1978.

the primary source, often much more important than the New Testament, for those who have tried to find a basis for political ideas in the Bible. Let us take an example straight away : of all the large-scale social effects exercised by the Bible, none has been more striking than the prohibition of the lending of money at interest. This was standard church doctrine for many centuries over large areas, even if that doctrine was never fully effective in practice. Now the prohibition of lending at interest could not well be based upon the New Testament : on the contrary, one might say, Jesus rather encouraged the practice, for he is said to have reproved the man who, given a sum of money to keep by his master, wrapped it in a napkin or dug a hole and kept it in the ground. "You ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own *with interest*" (Matt. xxv. 27 RSV). Only a parable, of course ; but even a parable puts in a certain light the practices that it uses as an image of reality : we can hardly imagine Jesus saying this if the earning of interest on capital had been for him a matter of intrinsic evil. So, if one was against the taking of interest on loans, it was of little use to appeal to the teaching of Jesus. In fact, in so far as people looked to the Bible for guidance in this regard,<sup>1</sup> they looked to the Old Testament, and there, it was understood, the laws of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy forbade the exaction of interest by Jews from debtors who were also Jews. "Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury ; but unto thy brother thou shalt not lend upon usury" (Deut. xxiii. 20 AV). And upon an exegetical basis in laws of this kind Christian Europe over some centuries sought to build a society in which the levying of interest was forbidden—a course that, paradoxically, did a great deal of good to the Jews, for the laws were so interpreted as to mean that, within Christendom, Christians could not exact interest from other Christians but Jews could do so, and this gave a livelihood to many Jews in a society in which they might otherwise have been left without means of sustenance.

<sup>1</sup> Biblical materials, indeed, were not the only basis for the prohibition of the taking of interest : on another side it was an inheritance from the Aristotelian doctrine that money in itself is by nature "barren".

This then was one of the images that the Bible cast into the soul of medieval Europe. But, we are entitled to ask, how was it in fact in ancient Israel? Was it really a society in which credit could be obtained without the payment of interest? If so, what a paradise for debtors, and how different from our own civilization, where we groan under our hire purchase and our mortgage repayments! Can it really have been so? Mesopotamian sources of comparable epochs show us a society in which the supply of credit was highly organized, and rates of interest were high, often twenty or thirty per cent, sometimes reaching up to fifty or sixty, a figure that even the modern world can scarcely emulate. Such figures may seem high, but think of the risk to the lender: a bad harvest, a plague of locusts, a fire, a nocturnal disappearance of the debtor across the borders into Gaza or Phoenicia, all of them a much greater risk in a time when there were no police, no passports, virtually no state services—and the creditor would have lost not only his interest, but his principal as well. It would seem only reasonable that the lender should receive some compensation both for the use of his money and for the attendant risk, and ancient Israel must have been a strange sort of society if it refused entirely to recognize this.

In fact, however, it was probably not so in Israel, and there were arrangements for the supply of credit on interest that not only existed but were recognized and recommended by the law. A probable example is the law of the Hebrew slave (Exod. xxi. 2-6, English numbering). A man might "buy" a Hebrew slave, who would work for six years and then go free: behind this there may lie a complete system combining elements of credit, interest and poor relief. It may be that a man in need might sell himself into slavery, perhaps with his wife and family, and during that time the produce of their labour went to their owner, and that produce formed his interest; but the law regulated the matter and insisted that, at the end of six years, whether or not such a man had repaid his debt, he must go free.<sup>1</sup> Paradoxically, medieval Christendom, in its efforts to evade or to get around

<sup>1</sup> For an interesting discussion of this entire complex of problems, see R. North, *Sociology of the Biblical Jubilee* (Rome, 1954); on usury and mortgage, see pp. 176-84.

what it understood to be the provisions of the Pentateuchal law, may have stumbled upon forms of contract, through temporary sale, antichresis and the like, which came close to the actuality of Israelite practice. If this is so, then Israel did not prohibit all interest on credit but confined it to certain types that were socially and religiously acceptable. When we read that "usury" or "interest" are totally forbidden, this may probably refer to certain kinds of simple money loan which, when granted to the man who is already impoverished, tend to reduce him—as is still the case today—to even more desperate destitution than that in which he began.

I do not wish, however, to pursue this matter in greater detail: I cite it only as an illustration. It shows us, first of all, how the political and social impact of the Bible has often come from the Old Testament rather than from the New, and, secondly, how the political image, *understood* to be cast by the Bible, may be a very substantial misunderstanding of the actuality of what was going on in biblical times. These are two points that will recur in our further discussion.

Rather than spend more time in preamble, I propose to launch out into the first of the biblical images I want to talk about, and it is what I would call the *theocratic image*. According to the theocratic image God has laid down the way in which society ought to be governed and its affairs conducted. The essential constitution for human society has been written by God. These are not human regulations worked out by people who thought that such and such was the best thing for society, these are explicit divine regulations. They establish a centre of authority, in a person like Moses or the kings of Israel and Judah; around him they range, however vaguely as seen from today's point of view, various elders, ministers, judges and military commanders; and alongside this they lay down all sorts of particular enactments: what is to be done if a man is killed, whether accidentally or intentionally, what is to be done if a man has no son to whom to leave his inheritance but a family of daughters only (Num. xxvii, the story of the daughters of Zelophehad), and what is the rule in a polygamous society if a man has two wives and prefers one of them but his firstborn is the son of the one he does not like

(Deut. xxi. 15-17). Much of this material has the form of laws but not all of it is so : the theocratic norms are enforced as often through narratives as through laws. Narratives tell how the great ones behaved, what they demanded, what they counted as right and necessary. From all of this there came the picture of a society where things were what they were because the basic norms and structures were directly laid down by God. He laid down the degrees within which marriage was permitted, just as he laid down which birds or animals might be eaten, or what should be done if a dead body was found in the fields of a city, with no clues to the cause or culprit, or even what procedure should be followed if a man became suspicious of the doings of his wife and wanted to know if she had been guilty of adulterous conduct (Num. v). All such material has gone to form or to support the theocratic image cast by the Bible.

Now Christendom never accepted all these regulations in detail : many of them were deemed to belong to the past stage of Judaism and not to the newer world of Christianity. But this did not alter the fact that these elements continued within Christianity to support a theocratic image. Though Christendom was not ancient Jewry, it was a society theocratically ordained : God had laid down the rules, and the authorities, in enforcing these rules, had to understand that it was no mere human ordinances, but the divine prescription for society, that they were enforcing. From this root comes all that social apparatus that is commonly called the establishment of religion : the coronation service, the linkage of church and state, the table of forbidden degrees for marriage, and part of the way in which crimes against person and property have been regarded, so also (in part) the way in which the status of women and the possibilities of divorce and abortion have been understood in Christian societies until very recently. Under the theocratic image of society all these things were laid down : one of the main functions of the church, as men of the state saw it, was to tell everyone that this was so.

If we go back, however, into the Old Testament itself, and ask what were the sources and epochs from which this theocratic image came, we find rather ambiguous answers. The most

positively theocratic material comes, according to a probable analysis, from a late period (I take the Pentateuchal stratum commonly designated as P as the model for the theocratic image as it is developed here). If this is right, it was during the Persian Empire, when the Jews had lost their independence except for minor local affairs, and when they were a rather small local community governed by a priestly aristocracy, that their theocratic texts reached their fullest development. This fitted, indeed, a society with a priestly leadership, acknowledging the priestly norms as the norms of the society because they came from God himself. But, if it fitted, it fitted because beyond it there lay another and a quite different power, the power of the Persian emperor, whose norms and principles were quite different from those of the Jewish community and derived not from the God of Israel but from Ahura Mazda. And for later Christendom, much as it supported itself upon the theocratic image of the Bible, there was one difficulty. In Christendom, up to the French and American revolutions, theocracy meant more than any other single thing the legitimacy of monarchy, what at its highest level was defined as the Divine Right of Kings. But about kings and monarchy the Old Testament itself was equivocal. Its theocracy was, in the later portions, a priestly theocracy, the secular prince was there but only with very circumscribed functions. In the older history of Israel and Judah there were indeed kings, and the kings contributed much to the theocratic image, but the stories themselves made it clear that the origin of the monarchy was theologically ambivalent. This was not a society which had begun, as certain Mesopotamian societies had begun, "when kingship was lowered from heaven": no, kingship was not lowered from heaven in the beginning, on the contrary there had been a long time in Israel before kingship began, and when it began it began not as an element in the theocracy but as a rebellion against it. When the people went to Samuel and demanded, "Give us a king to judge us", Samuel prayed to the Lord and he said, "They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them." The idea of having a human king was a revolt against God. In respect of human monarchy the theocracy was thus ambiguous.

But in most of traditional Christianity this ambiguity was suppressed. The alternative, republicanism or democracy, some sort of system under which institutions derived from the people, seemed even less well supported by Holy Writ : after all, in so far as monarchy was to be faulted as a revolt against God, it was exactly because the people had demanded it, it was they who were to blame. Anyway, as people perceived it, the theocratic image enabled them to see society as a hierarchical organism under a divinely instituted human leadership, rightly and soundly constituted because God had made it so. In this respect the theocratic image derived from the Bible fused with ideas of power and authority the source of which lay above all in the Roman Empire. In this sense the theocratic image supports ordained authority, or at least it does so most of the time.

For a contrast to the theocratic image I shall turn rather to the New Testament. As I have said, those who seek a biblical basis for their political ideas have often, even if unconsciously, turned primarily to the Old Testament, and one reason for this has been that the New Testament, on so many burning social and political issues, seemed either to say nothing or to take an embarrassingly neutral stance. In this respect Jesus of Nazareth must be judged to have been rather neglectful. On the essential question, for example, of whether we should have a socialist or a free-enterprise economy, he said nothing at all. Perhaps he thought that the question came under the head of his guidance given to the man who came saying, " Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me " (Luke xii. 13). The passage continues : " and he said unto him, ' Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you ? ' "—which seems to mean that there are certain human struggles and disagreements which God, or Jesus, does not intend to settle : such things are human business, and there is no divine directive or initiative intended to regulate them. There is indeed a law of God, or an instruction of Jesus, which has to be borne in mind, and obeyed, in such matters : " Take heed, and beware of covetousness : for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth ". But this necessarily means that the divine theocracy does not settle every human question. And this is in accord with

the more famous answer of Jesus to the question about the tribute money: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's" (Mark xii. 17; Matt. xxii. 21; Luke xx. 25). Obviously the answer leaves one enormous gap: it does not tell us what is Caesar's and what is God's; but in principle it makes one striking point, which differs in essence from the theocratic image: there is at least something, somewhere, that is Caesar's, not everything is God's. There is authority on earth that is not directly validated by the Jewish theocratic image. There is thus a certain dualism in society: not everything can be derived from one sole principle. And thus, to the disgust of radicals and committed conservatives alike, and of all those who consider that political involvement is the essence of Christianity, Jesus seems in some situations to have taken a position of some neutrality and refused to align God in the partisan struggles of men. Those bishops and church leaders who have sought, rightly or wrongly, to keep the church separate from party political struggles have been following in this tradition. A certain neutralism on Jesus' part, towards at least some human squabbles, partisanship and conflicts seems to be a genuine part of the biblical inheritance.

Now, when I use the word "Jesus" in this connection, I mean Jesus as he is portrayed in the Gospels as we have them. It is necessary to say this because not all agree that the actual Jesus thought and acted as he is there portrayed. In particular, according to one interpretation of the evidence, the real and historical Jesus was deeply involved in the party politics of his time: far from being above the human conflicts of the Jews in the Roman Empire, he was an activist nationalist and revolutionary worker, allied with the Zealot movement and seeking to promote a military conflict with Rome. This militaristic Jesus, a sort of Che Guevara of the time, was later covered up by the writers of the Gospels, who wanted the Roman Empire to look favourably on Christianity and brought this about by representing Jesus as a non-worldly and non-political man of God.<sup>1</sup> I am not

<sup>1</sup> A Manchester audience will naturally think, of course, of our late colleague Professor S. G. F. Brandon's *Jesus and the Zealots* (Manchester, 1967); cf. also the long review by M. Hengel, translated into English by the present writer, in



concerned to argue here the rights and the wrongs of this position. I merely reiterate that Jesus *as depicted in the Gospels* is not a militaristic revolutionary of that kind ; and it is from the Jesus of the Gospels, and not from the reconstructed Jesus of Zealot sympathies, that a quite special image of the political impact of the Bible has fallen upon later Christendom.

But, even if only negatively, the position just described helps us to see one of the things about Jesus that was different from the more purely theocratic image cast by some Old Testament sources. For Jesus it was much more clear that the actual power, even in Jewish affairs, came from Rome. As we saw, the theocratic image had its fullest expression, perhaps, in texts written under the Persian empire ; but Persia, though it was the world power, was relatively remote, was quite favourable to Jewish religious needs, and was not much inclined to meddle in everyday details. Under Persia it was possible for Jewish thinkers to dream that they formed a small but virtually independent commonwealth living under the plan dictated by God. Under Rome this was no longer so easy : Rome was close at hand, its power reached into the detailed day-to-day life of Judaea, it seemed to threaten Jewish religious sensibilities more fearfully, and people were therefore the more inclined to suppose, as the Zealots claimed, that divine rule demanded the overthrow of Roman power. This being so, it is all the more significant that the Jesus of the Gospels, and I am inclined to believe the real Jesus also, did not align himself with this demand. Thus, alongside the more purely theocratic image, there stands another, the image of a world where not all is regulated by the command of God, at least not directly, an image that recognizes as a legitimate factor a force that derives from elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

*Journal of Semitic Studies* xiv (1969), 231-40, and Hengel's later little book, *War Jesus Revolutionär ?* (Stuttgart, 1970). I remember Professor Brandon telling me how surprised he was when people drew from his book the conclusion that, if Jesus so acted, we today should therefore support various groups of "freedom fighters" and other national/revolutionary movements in diverse parts of the world. Brandon himself was, of course, very much a man of the British Empire and entirely conservative, so far as I know, towards such movements. This is only one of the many paradoxes in the entire matter of political/religious linkages.

<sup>1</sup> One might add here some mention of the image of the two swords, in which the power of the state is derived from God and works in parallel with God's direct

In the older Christendom the theocratic image was no doubt the dominant and most common one ; in more modern times it has come to be increasingly displaced by others. Many people in different ages have thought that the church ought to address itself to the state and to society, protesting against the evils of contemporary life and calling for reform if not for revolution. Especially since the nineteenth century has this been so. As has been remarked, those who have felt this way did not always find very much clear precedent or express encouragement in the words of Jesus or in the teaching of the New Testament church : for that church, so far as we can see, did comparatively little to address itself to the task of social reform in the Roman Empire. Paul's failure to say anything substantial about slavery, when he was writing the letter to Philemon which involved that very subject, was worrying ; and that same apostle's doctrine that the powers that be are ordained by God and that anyone who resists that power is resisting God and will receive damnation seems to support an unhealthy acceptance of things as they are. It was precisely this lack of strong support in the New Testament that made many Christians, anxious to work for social protest and social reform, turn to the Old Testament—a turn that was in many ways paradoxical, for the same social liberalism and reformism which in this regard turned them towards the Old Testament commonly turned them in all other regards away from it. The locus in the Old Testament which they found to be central lay in the prophets, and it has in fact become customary in the church by this time that any activity addressing the state, the social condition of the land, the political problems of the time and the like is considered to be “ prophetic ” and is so named. This appeal to the prophets as the men who insisted on righteousness in the social order fitted in very well, because it coincided with a shift from one Christian perception of the Hebrew prophets to another. The older traditional Christianity had seen the prophets primarily as foretellers of the future, as predictive Messianists, as men who, long before the time, told of the coming of Jesus

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theocratic government, being as it were a separate department of it : this image might be regarded as a compromise between the more purely theocratic and the more dualist or neutralist. I shall not however dwell further on it in this paper.

the Christ and of his sufferings. In the newer perception of the prophets this became at best muted and indirect. A prophet, it was now said, was not a foreteller but a forthteller. He did not predict the future or, if he did so, this was not his main interest : what he did above all was to proclaim the demand of God for the realization of righteousness in social relationships here and now.

This then is our third image of the Bible's heritage in political matters, the picture of the prophet insisting on social righteousness now, a social righteousness which, it is clearly implied, the theocratic constitution of the nation has not availed to provide. The prophet is no neutral in these conflicts : he takes the side of the weak and the oppressed, he calls for their rights, he speaks up for them before the mighty, he demands unceasingly that the will of God should be done. Unless it is done, God will not hesitate to overthrow the mighty, and the claims of a justice guaranteed by divine theocratic legitimacy, a justice that by its inaction favours the powerful and leaves the poor and the weak to suffer, will be disregarded by God himself. The prophetic image thus appeals directly to God himself : it goes over the head of the legitimate authority, saying that such legitimacy counts for nothing unless it delivers the goods in the form of social justice for all today. The prophetic image in this sense has been an important ingredient in much progressive, reformist, politically activist Christianity for the last hundred years.

When we compare it, however, with what is now known of the actual prophets of Israel, the prophetic image also is rich in paradox. The prophets were very far from being similar to the progressive, somewhat scientific, often mildly socialistic, often open-minded and generally reasonable, people who looked to them for authority and inspiration. Certainly it is true that the prophets insisted on social justice, and they were not afraid in its name to challenge the established authorities of their time. But the prophets for the most part were not reformers, and they had no new insights into the working of society to offer. Theirs was not a novel analysis, on the ground of which new perceptions of social need might arise, from which in turn demands for righteousness and mercy in new dimensions might be heard. On the contrary, in this respect the social perspectives and perceptions

of the prophets were essentially conservative. What they declared was the traditional morality exacted by the God of Israel. Their message was not a new morality, but the reality of the sanctions that had been attached to the old. Take the example, typical of the early prophetic movement, of Naboth's vineyard (I Kings xxi). Naboth had a vineyard, and Ahab the king wanted it, for it was near his new palace in Samaria; so he offered to buy it, or to exchange it for a better vineyard; but Naboth said, "God forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers". When Ahab heard this, he knew there was no more he could do, for in Israel by ancient customary law it was not permitted to alienate the land that had belonged to a family. So Ahab lay down on his bed, turned his face to the wall, and would eat no bread. He did not even think of violating the customary law of his people. But Jezebel, the queen, being a foreigner, cared nothing for these things, and it took her only a moment, when she found out what had happened, to hire some false witnesses and have Naboth put out of the way. But then Elijah sought out Ahab and found him, and declared against him the judgement of God: "Thus saith the Lord, in the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth, shall dogs lick thy blood." In all the story there is no new approach to morality: the old morality is presupposed throughout, and what the prophet insists on is the drastic character of the punishment that will follow when the old morality is transgressed.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the traditional liberal and reformist perception that the system is wrong and that the system has to be changed if justice is to be made possible is lacking from the prophetic perspective. Practically never do we find the prophets putting forward any sort of practical suggestions for change in the structure of society. Jeremiah once (Jer. xxxiv) denounces the king, Zedekiah, because he had promised release to all persons in (temporary) slavery; but this is not because Jeremiah wants to abolish the institution of such slavery, rather it is because the

<sup>1</sup> As always in such matters, details in this interpretation of the story could be questioned and a different interpretation could be offered. This, however, does not matter much, for another illustration could easily be found from elsewhere to show the traditional character of the morality presupposed by the prophets.

king, and others with him, having first promised to release these people, have gone back on their word. No impulse to reform the structure of society is to be found here. But most important in this respect is the great change of direction in the policy of the prophets that took place between Elisha and Hosea, between the ninth-century prophets and those of the eight. In the ninth century, even if there were no plans for change in the structure of society, there were at least active prophetic interventions in political life. Clearly it was thought, in the midst of increasing Canaanization and Baalization of the land, that certain powerful circles, inclined toward fanatical, exclusive and conservative Yahwism, might be brought to power, and that such people by means of a *coup d'état* (rather than a revolution, which suggests a change of political structure or principle) might overthrow the decadent dynasty and establish a purer society under God. So Elisha anointed Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel and incited him to rebel and overthrow the existing government; and this he did, putting the existing king to death, having Jezebel thrown from the window, and massacring the congregation of the worshippers of Baal. Here indeed was political activism from the prophets. But the important thing is that this line was not followed farther. On the contrary, when the next wave of prophetic activity began under Amos and Hosea, one of the first cardinal points in its programme was the abandonment of the line taken by Jehu: as Hosea put it, "I will avenge the blood of Jezreel (where the great massacre had taken place) upon the house of Jehu". In fact from this time onwards, and throughout the main period of Hebrew prophecy, the fomenting of *coups d'état* and violent revolution is a course that the prophets abjure. It is as if they feel that the nation is too badly spoiled for resources for its reform from within to survive: any attempt to purify through political action from within will be no purification, but only the releasing of another flow of evil. From now on, for the prophets, God will still work through political events, but not through internal political uprisings stimulated within Israel: God will act upon his people, judging and redeeming, but he will do it not through political forces from within the country, but through the power of the great empires that surround her,

through Assyria, Babylonia and Persia. This particular political image, that of the God who works through political events but through those external to the nation rather than through its own internal politics, is perhaps the profoundest insight of the mature Old Testament period, at least among the prophets. It may seem at first sight surprising that it has had rather little effect on political thought, certainly much less than the image of the prophet as pursuer of social righteousness. On further thought, however, the neglect of this insight is not so surprising. Most political ideas are concerned with the conflicts lying within one political system, while this particular biblical image cannot easily be assimilated to the internal dynamics of any particular political system.

Thus the sort of thing for which people have appealed to the prophetic image—the pressing for reform, the calling for new structures in society, the seeking of a societal pattern in which it was possible for all to live decently—all this is something that was rather little done by the actual prophets. This is not to say, however, that nothing of the kind took place. Curiously, this sort of pressure for the adjustment of society towards the greater realization of justice took place in Israel, but it was done much more through the medium of the law than through that of the prophets. The failure to perceive this may be ascribed to the long-standing Christian disposition to undervalue the law of the Old Testament and to ascribe more positive value to the prophets. On the surface the law of Israel appeared as something laid down once and for all by God through Moses, and in this sense it contributed to the theocratic image; but in fact the law was also a human social mechanism for the regulation of life, and there is plenty of evidence that it adjusted itself gradually in order to avoid the more serious injustices and the more inequitable pressures upon individuals or groups. We can see such adjustment, for instance, in the laws governing homicide. Starting from a rather primitive principle, whereby any killing counted as virtual murder and might be avenged with impunity, the law moves to the giving of sanctuary to a killer but only if it can be shown that the killing is involuntary; and from there, when the local sanctuaries came to be closed down and only the one great sanctuary at Jerusalem remained, the plan of “cities of refuge”

was set up, to provide places where the involuntary slayer might find asylum until the time came when he could again be reintegrated into society. There was thus reform in Israel, and indeed it may well have derived some of its motivation from the teaching of the prophets ; but the direct means of reformist pressure came through the law rather than from the prophets.

These then are three of the great images projected by the Bible into the mind of later Christendom, the three that I have called the theocratic, the more neutral and dualistic, and the prophetic. These, however, by no means exhaust the series of political images which the Bible has produced. I shall discuss more briefly another three. Our fourth image we may call the image of the migrating nation. Migration, change of location, displacement, is an image deeply burned into the soul of biblical man. The Old Testament tells of at least three major such migrations : that of Abraham, who was called by God to leave Mesopotamia and go to another country ; then the great journey of the children of Israel, forty years in the wilderness, from the borders of Egypt to the land that was to be theirs ; and thirdly the yearning of the exiles in Babylonia and other lands, a longing for return to the holy land, a yearning that was partly fulfilled in the time of Ezra and others in the early Persian period. The early church appropriated to itself this imagery of the people on the move ; it is especially evident in the Letter to the Hebrews. The church is a migrating people, journeying towards its heavenly home : " here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come ". This applied of course to the church, and not to the nation or the political system. But with the rise of nationalism the Christian nations were often quick to adopt this terminology and apply it to themselves, and especially so in those nations which had a Calvinistic religious heritage, one therefore in which the Old Testament was particularly influential. Scotland, for instance, thought of herself as an Israel, a specially enclosed community seeking to build its own Zion (the phenomenon of modern Scottish nationalism is not unconnected with that tradition) ; still more so did the puritan emigrants to New England think, or again the Latter-Day Saints, moving westward, looking for a land where there would be only themselves and their God—

they, as if the biblical imagery was not enough for them, added their own holy book as an additional mythology. But the most powerful examples are two others : firstly the Afrikaners, who left the land where they thought they were interfered with, to trek out into territories where they could serve their God as they believed they must ; and secondly of course the Zionists, for whom the return to the holy land was not a metaphor but a literal return to the land of the Bible itself. However large the admixture of secularism within the Zionist movement as it was realized, it was the biblical image of migration and return that furnished its motive power, and still does so to this day. All of these are ways in which the Bible has proved to be a political document with enormous force and significance.

Our fifth image is the eschatological image, the image of a new world, a new heaven and a new earth, a sudden transformation of the world from a state of pain and evil and imperfection into a quite other world. This image comes from the prophets and still more from the later apocalyptic writers : " it shall come to pass," said Isaiah, " that in the last days the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and all nations shall flow unto it . . . they shall beat their swords into plowshares, neither shall they practise war any more " (Isa. ii. 2-4) ; or again (xi. 2-9) in the days of the coming king " the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, the lion shall eat straw like the ox . . . they shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain ; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." But most of all in the Apocalypse of St. John : after great turmoil and torment, catastrophic overturning and judgement, comes the calm assurance : " I saw a new heaven and a new earth . . . the tabernacle of God is with men, and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes ; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away ; and he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new " (Rev. xxi. 1-5). In the end of the world all human problems will be resolved, all evil banished ; there will be a new world in which only righteousness will dwell. And all this may happen very soon.



This image has, of course, been powerful throughout all sorts of religious currents, where men have looked for a speedy ending of the present world and a quick realization of the will of God on earth. Many have gone farther and argued that the great secular eschatologies of our time, of which the Marxist is the most important, are humanizations and secularizations of that biblical hope. Yes, there will be a new world, in which all wrong will be swept away, and it will come swiftly and soon, with revolutionary force: the difference is that it will come not through the intervention of God but by the economic forces of history, leading to inevitable revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is clear that this Marxist picture has certain resemblances to the eschatological images of the Bible and certain common features. That it is actually derived from these images may be questioned. It has often been pointed out that Marx was of Jewish origin, and some interpreters have suggested that in his fervent denunciations of capitalism there burned the fire of the Hebrew prophets speaking out against the oppression of the widow, the orphan and the poor. It may be so, but it is difficult to build much upon this, unless one supposes that the prophetic spirit is transmitted genetically rather than through the paying of actual attention to the prophets and what they said, or through any actual experience of Jewish life. For Marx, though of Jewish background, was brought up as a Christian, and indeed, rather surprisingly, one of his first writings still extant is a schoolboy composition on the Gospel of St. John; and it is hard to see how the environment of his middle-class Rhineland family could have transmitted to the young Karl anything much of the authentic flavour of the Hebrew prophets. That essay on St. John shows no particular awareness of the Hebrew background of Christianity and has no particular connection with the philosophy and economics which the mature Marx was in due course to develop. Any German boy of intelligence could have written it. A recent work on political theology has a chapter which begins with the assertion, baldly made, without any evidence or supporting argument: "The most formative influence on Marx was not Hegel but the Bible."<sup>1</sup> This seems to me to be pure wishful thinking. It

<sup>1</sup> Alistair Kee, *A Reader in Political Theology* (London, 2nd ed., 1977), p. 21.

would be pleasant, from some points of view, if Marx's thought had been built upon the influence of the Bible ; but, of course, it was not. In so far as Marx built into his thinking any influence from the Bible, it may well be that he derived that influence from Hegel anyway : for Hegel had in fact studied theology and had some ideas about biblical problems.

It is therefore quite doubtful whether the Marxist eschatology originated as a secularization of the biblical images of an end to the world and the coming of a new heaven and a new earth. But no doubt to those Christians who have come to understand Marxism in this way the image has begun so to function : if they think of revolution, and the destruction of the capitalist order, as paths to the fulfilment of the will of God, they have certainly begun to use the biblical image *as if* it had a high degree of common ground with Marxism. But the whole Marxist scheme was built upon supposedly scientific economic and historical considerations all of which would have been totally foreign to the spirit of the prophets, or indeed of anyone in biblical time at all.

This brings me to the last of the possible biblical images that I shall consider in this paper, and one that is at the present time attracting much attention in various parts of the world : I mean, of course, the image of liberation. Liberation has been a powerful motif in much of human affairs over the last twenty years or so : countries have to be liberated, struggling classes have to be liberated, women have to be liberated, and indeed it sometimes looks as if there is hardly any individual person, class, institution or activity that is not in need of liberation. Theology has not been far behind and various theologies of liberation have been published and have been hailed as a significant modern development. Such theologies have pointed to the important place of the terms " free " and " freedom " in the New Testament. " If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed " (John viii. 36) ; " Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all " (Gal. iv. 26) ; " the creation will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God " (Rom. viii. 21). Moreover, it is pointed out, the central and nuclear incident in the Old Testament is a liberation. The

Hebrews were in Egypt, they fell increasingly under despotism and economic oppression, even under something approaching a primitive form of genocide, for the King of Egypt is reported (Exod. i. 16) to have told the Hebrew midwives to terminate the lives of all male children at birth, a purpose in which, however, he was frustrated through a tall story thought up by the midwives. From this bad situation the children of Israel were in due course delivered, and they later looked back with a shudder on Egypt as the house of bondage from which they were very glad to have escaped. No longer given straw with which to make bricks, the Israelites had both to find the straw and make the bricks, but without any reduction in their daily productivity; they complained about the impossibility of this, but Pharaoh explained it as laziness (Exod. v. 8, 17), the typical capitalist employer blaming the slackness of his labour force.

It is not so certain, however, that the Exodus event within the Old Testament is really a "liberation". The elements quoted in this sense are often folkloristic embellishments of the tradition and do not represent its deep structure.<sup>1</sup> Matters like the making of bricks without straw, the accusation of laziness, the supposedly attempted prevention of male births, are not fundamental to the Exodus theme. It is doubtful even whether the transition from "slave" to "free" status is a major element in its basic structure. While the "house of slavery" is a frequently mentioned symbol of the restrictions of Egypt, it is not the case that the contrast between "slave" and "free" plays an important part; on the contrary, the terms "free" and "freedom" are little used in the Old Testament's narrative accounts of the Exodus. Indeed, "free" and "freedom" as general theological terms have little prominence in the Old Testament at all. The elements which are truly basic to the Exodus narrative are two others: firstly, the *destruction* of the Egyptians at the crossing of the sea, a destruction carried out by God and one in which Israel is involved as the pursued party and thus as the occasion of the

<sup>1</sup> See, among many discussions, the article of Professor G. Sauter, "'Exodus' und 'Befreiung' als theologische Metaphern", *Evangelische Theologie*, xxxviii (1978), 538-59; it is hoped that an English version of this article will be published in due course.

incident : a central ancient text like the poem of Exodus xv says nothing about economic or social conditions in Egypt ; and secondly, the call to *migrate* from Egypt to the land where the fathers had dwelt. The issue is not the attainment of " freedom " but the settlement of that land. Thus to take the Exodus story as a prime example of " liberation " is to make a too hasty short-circuit of a few elements in that narrative complex. Though the story sketched in a few pictures of oppression and disadvantage, basically it was not about that, it was about the worship of the true God, his action upon the Egyptians, and the possession of the land which he had promised to his people.

In saying this we have not dealt with the complex relations of the concepts " freedom " and " liberation " to the basic material of the Bible, and especially not to the New Testament. But at least it must be clear that the Exodus theme is not as obviously a " liberation ", in the modern sense, as has commonly been supposed, on the basis of Old Testament evidence.

By now, however, we have given consideration to quite long enough a series of political images created, or supposedly created, by the Bible ; and it is time to summarise the discussion and bring it towards a conclusion. I have not tried to present a systematic or comprehensive account of all the political images which the Bible has created or might conceivably create ; rather, I have given only a partial and impressionistic account of a few of them. For instance, we might have added a consideration of the idea of *covenant* as a central political concept, widely influential in North America and elsewhere. But our purpose has been to provide a few illustrations rather than a full account. What sort of purpose may we suppose that such a survey has fulfilled ?

First of all, though I have not attempted to state what impact, if any, the Bible, rightly interpreted, should have upon political thinking within or without the church, it is clear that, if such a statement were to be attempted, it would be essential to have a good analytical grasp of the various sorts of impact it has in the past been supposed to have. Only when we look carefully at the sort of political views that have in the past been supposed to derive from the Bible can we to some extent free ourselves from these views and make ourselves able to see the biblical evidence

for what it is. As we have seen, there is a wide variety of political images derivable, whether rightly or wrongly, from the Bible, and any attempt to address modern political and social problems from within the church must take account of this variety.

Secondly, these various possibilities affect not only the "application" of biblical materials to political questions but also the receipt and understanding of them even within a strictly religious context. For example, where people have seen the Old Testament in the light primarily of a theocratic image, they have often supposed that it justifies and supports a draconian law of punishment for offences against person and property. Those, by contrast, who think rather liberally about such matters will tend to reject the authority of the Old Testament precisely because they suppose its positions to be unreasonably severe. All such judgements are in fact ill-founded. The theft of property, for instance, is rather gently dealt with in the Old Testament and in Jewish law generally, and the situation that obtained in England a century or two ago, when a man might be hanged for the theft of a sheep, was quite unknown. Again, those who perceive how the Old Testament has been used in support of racial prejudices in certain countries will often be all the quicker to devalue the Old Testament even as a religious authority. In general, people's views of the authority of the Old Testament have often been determined by the picture they see of its social consequences and implications.

Thirdly, we in the modern world are becoming increasingly conscious of the variety of the biblical material and the differences between the various lines of thinking it can generate on any subject. Instead of striving to obtain one single unitary biblical theology, we have begun to accept that the Bible itself contains a variety of differing theologies, to some extent competing with and correcting one another. The same is likely to be true of the social and political impact of the Bible: it contains the resources for a multitude of differing perspectives and approaches. This does not mean, however, that any and all opinions should be accepted uncritically merely on the grounds that they have at some time and to some person appeared to be in concord with the Bible. On the contrary, as we have seen, most political views

that have appealed to the Bible or have been derived from it are only partly in agreement with it, or are in agreement only with a thin segment within it, or indeed are not in agreement with it at all. Many such views, which may have appeared obvious to a reader reading scripture "in the flat", on the basis of the English versions and of a traditional Christianity, look quite different when they are considered in the light of the actualities of biblical history and society as they are now known. A long journey of exploration and discussion lies before us before we can hope to have overcome the complexity of this problem.

Fourthly, this paper has not attempted to approach the question, how the modern Christian should try to determine his attitude to political questions. We have looked only at the relation between the answers—or some of them—that have been historically offered and the realities of life in biblical times. It would appear that most of these traditional answers have assumed a more simple and direct relationship between biblical data and modern ethical decision than should be accepted by Christians today. For instance, the fact—which seems to me to be incontrovertible—that the prophets were conservative in their morality does not automatically mean that we in our situation should also be conservative in our morality. Such a decision depends upon many factors, most of which have not been uncovered in this survey. Guidance for the actual process and direction of Christian political decision-making is a further question, lying beyond what has been said here; to it this paper serves at most as only a prolegomenon. The awareness of past answers, and of the relationship between them and biblical actuality, can nevertheless be a salutary guide and assistance to us in such further steps as we may seek to take.