

LOUISE ZARUNA

A THEOLOGY
OF RESPONSE

THE SOCIOLOGICAL
CONTINGENCY OF THE BIBLE

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To
The Seekers after growth
In Solidarity

INTRODUCTION

Billions of Christians today base their faith and conduct on the collection of instructional and devotional writings that constitute the Holy Bible. To these practitioners of what is still the world's largest major religious group, the Christian Scriptures are valued in a wide variety of ways: As the very Word of God himself, "spoken" to people in times past and continually communicated up to the present time through what someone has compared to a process of eavesdropping in which present-day readers lean in and listen to a personal or communal address highlighting timeless principles and truths to spur one in the walk of faith; as a moral guidepost, for life in any age, full of inspiring and inspirational heroic example; or even as a devotional primer or basis for a deep and vibrant spirituality.¹

A vast number of theological systems have been articulated on the grounds of their supposed attestation in the Scriptures, and much ink has been spilled on matters as basic as

¹ These ways of viewing the nature of the revelation that the Bible imparts are not mutually exclusive but in very fact mutually inclusive in the following manner: the first point, that the Bible is the Word of God personally given to the reader in the act of receiving it for oneself, indicates the shape of the revelation that the Bible provides; that is, the Scriptures give more than dead and sterile information; they furnish a personal message from God himself for the believer; the second point, pertaining to how the Bible provides moral direction, deals with what has been called the propositions or assertions about the nature of God, of humankind, and his requirements for their conduct; and the third, regarding the mystical dimension of Bible reading, touches on the emotions and convictions that are stirred up in the course of the direct and personal impartation of a truth through the words of Scripture.

whether and how Christ is the divine saviour, the cosmic Lord of heavenly-earthly reconciliation and also loftier ones like the extent to which a supposedly omnipotent God has control and command over the affairs of the world and human action that drives both good and wicked accomplishment. And yet self-avowed and self-professed followers of Christ do not merely represent varying theological persuasions on issues of Christology and divine sovereignty and freewill; Christians today and historically have been divided into a number of major camps, each of which can be further subdivided into smaller groupings.²

Regardless of where individual Christian believers stand on matters of such great import, the question remains as to how the Bible is read, and ought to be read. Believers tend to draw a more or less direct line from the Scriptures to the present day in seeking to understand the significance of their many passages for their current situations in order to apply their truths to their own lives. Consequently, the numerous references to the power and control God possesses over the reality he created and the many indications of the authority he exercises upon even demons and the archnemesis of Christianity are simply extrapolated to the present time, to proffer encouragement and inspiration toward perseverance in the midst of great difficulty.³ While such

² The major Christian groupings are the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, and all the denominations that fall under the Protestant umbrella. Within the Protestant fold, some would isolate the Anglican Communion and the Pentecostal movement of churches as, more or less, loose alliances, giving rise to a classification of between three to five kinds.

³ This appears to be a corollary of the view that the Scriptures were subject to a kind of inspiration, sometimes called “verbal plenary inspiration”, in which every word is believed to have been inspired or personally chosen by God himself to speak to all kinds of

theologies have served a positive purpose, for all their good intention and noble attempt to articulate the truth of God, they may not be able to properly address contemporary questions of consequence such as the relationship between Christianity, other religions, and atheism in a world marked by a need to pursue a harmony deeper than religious belief, and the all-important subject of the problem of evil and suffering in a context whereby more and more we are coming to understand the detrimental effects of guilt on the individual psyche and the abuses of moralistic-dogmatic religious systems on whole communities as well as the need to come to terms with the dignity of the human person vis-à-vis God.

It is crucial for Christians to understand that in his condescension in coming to the human being, God does not ignore the human context and situation of life. He does not, for instance, toss a codex, a series of universally applicable laws in the form of a huge stone stele onto a geographically central location on earth for nations and communities to adopt.⁴ Even when God

settings, except where fulfilled by the ministry of Christ. For a statement of the doctrine of verbal plenary inspiration, see the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, Articles II and VI, which together undergird a specific conception of the purpose of the Scriptures and the use to which they should be put. The statement can be accessed at: https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=5&ved=2ahUKEwjwgcB0vejAhVp73MBHS6qDFIQFjAEegQIBhAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.danielakin.com%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2Ffold%2FResource_545%2FBook%25202%2C%2520Sec%252023.pdf&usq=AOvVaw1a6DJaDSahVJE3r7iVxyVI.

⁴ The Decalogue does come close to being that, but one needs to appreciate that the content of the Bible can hardly be exhaustively summarised in the Ten Commandments. No doubt, the Ten Words constitute a comprehensive set of legal and moral principles by which the Israelites were to live and are situated in a literary context which draws attention to the gracious action of God toward his people; as they stand, however, they are a contextually appropriate set of laws in the precise manner in which they are phrased. Moreover, it is equally crucial that God codify the action he expects

promulgated the Ten Commandments through Moses in the nation of Israel, the thrust and substratum of his laws was the unconditional and exclusive loyalty required of the fledging national community of people, and broad regulations were enacted to preserve the practice of religion and prevent a degeneration into societal anomie. If God required exclusive allegiance to him, it was because societies in those days were oriented around their worship of their respective gods, and religious unity was a basis for national oneness. One needs only to note that in the preface to the Decalogue, God declares to his people in a solemn reminder that it was he who was responsible for their status as a people freed from their state of captivity in Egypt (Exod. 20:2).

It was from the indebtedness of the Israelites to Yahweh God that their obedience to his laws in the Ten Words had to be educated. On account of the fact that they had been redeemed from their Egyptian taskmasters and brought back under the ownership of their God, they were to serve him alone (Exod. 20:3) and take great care not to substitute his worship with any other form of religious devotion (Exod. 20:4). They were to fear Yahweh and not misuse his name perhaps to deceitfully win the trust of others (Exod. 20:7), and they were to set aside one day in a week to rest from their labours in recognition of the fact that God has created them in his image to work six days of the week and rest on the

corresponding to his own treatment of humankind, and that he makes provision for witness to the latter through the whole record of the Scriptures and not just one segment, and through much narrative and other genres and not just legal code.

seventh (Exod. 20:8). When Yahweh commands his people to honour their parents, refrain from killing, adultery, theft, false witness, and covetousness (Exod. 20:12-17), the idea is for them to respect the dignity that God has invested in the human person as having been made in his very image (cf. Gen. 9:5-6). Leviticus 19:9-18 links the commission of theft (v. 11) and false witness (v. 16) with a dishonouring or a profanation of God's name, and also ties with regard for God the expression and demonstration of love toward a neighbour, as much as one loves oneself, in contrast with lack of compassion toward, mistreatment, exploitation or hatred of the same (v. 18).

In this way, the Decalogue is very much a context-based set of legal and moral principles, crafted in response to the realities of life faced by a community of people recently liberated from Egyptian enslavement and standing in dire need of a firm national religious identity so that they would not be reabsorbed into the land of oppression they had left; they were also in need of an ethical code of conduct to contain latent forces that might weaken or even destroy the social fabric. Rendered in the present day, the Ten Words would almost certainly take a different form in seeking to address issues of current concern such as the threat of a nuclear holocaust, continued harmonious relations between religious groups, climate change, terminal diseases, natural disasters, treatment of foreigners and other marginalised groups. We would probably hear less about the need for exclusive loyalty to Yahweh God because the time of religious territorial warfare is

long gone. There would be little need for any particular religious group to devote much attention to societal morality since that has already been enshrined in most modern democratic laws and legal systems. Indeed, the very fact we are now in a position to discuss the question of whether one can be good without God evinces the way in which morality has developed beyond religion.⁵

How, then, would the Decalogue or, for that matter, any summary of the requirements of Yahweh God look in the world in which we live today? We suggest that there would be key variations in points of emphasis. In the course of our first three chapters, we will explore the ways in which God's requirements for today would be democratic rather than theocratic, inclusive rather than exclusive, and positive rather than negative.

What kind of bearing does the atoning sacrifice of Christ have on the practice of the Christian religion in the present time? To address this question, we need first to consider the relationship between the atonement of Christ and the laws in the Old Testament, along with the old covenantal system. When the Lord Jesus came from Nazareth to bring a Gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven, by no means did he bring a completely new message or teaching. Granted that many in his day experienced his teaching as authoritative and radical, yet one of the ways in which he described his commission was in terms of ushering in a fulfilment of the laws that were promulgated by Moses (Matt.

⁵ In our estimation, this marks a positive development in view that religion should not hold a monopoly over ethics. The requirement to be a believer – for would-be adherents of a religious system – and that to be moral are separate obligations, and should not be made contingent one on the other.

5:17-20). He was pictured by the Jewish people as someone who can be identified with John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets (Matt. 16:14). Although he repeatedly affirmed his messianic identity as the Son of God sent from the Father in heaven to bring true knowledge of him first to the Jews, there was a profound sense in which he stood in the tradition of Moses and the Prophets, of the Israelites in relation to their calling from Yahweh, so that he was the ideal Israelite, the ideal progenitor and ancestor of the human race in being the new Adam, and his brief was not so much to establish new foundations for human existence but to lead Israel in a return to an original calling, vocation, and design of God for humanity, and succeed where the entire community of faith had been found wanting.

How did Jesus bring about that reestablishment of the Jewish people and the rest of humanity on God's design for them? He did that by serving as a lawgiver in the mould of Moses, dispensing the requirements of God for those who would be called his people (Matt. 5:21-37) in which he drew out the essence of the laws against murder, adultery, and misuse of God's name in a false vow. He also executed the function of an Old Testament prophet in following his calling to go to a people that would reject him (cf. Jer. 1:4-18). Like Jeremiah, Jesus was mistreated by the putative people of God and suffered great humiliation and injustice at the hands of the Jews in first century Israel as the religious leaders conspired to arrest and crucify him. When he rose on the third day after he had died, as he had foretold to his

disciples, it was in vindication of the holy and divine nature of his vocation, attesting to the way in which he was indeed sent from God, from the Father, rather than being a troublemaker who presented an ever-present danger to peaceful relations between the Roman colonial government and the Jewish people in Israel or, worse yet, a threat to religious orthodoxy and the purity of faith and stability of the religious community. A direct and flat contradiction of the beliefs and convictions of those who opposed Jesus was the clear message heralded from the garden tomb in which he resurrected by the power of God through his Spirit of holiness.

Through his miraculous and most dramatic coming again to life from the dead, God the Father and God the Holy Spirit declared to the Jews and the Roman authorities who executed Jesus that he was indeed the chosen Messiah of God, the long-awaited Davidic successor (Rom. 1:4). It was as though God had passed his verdict on Jesus in the heavenly court in full view of the world, asserting his innocence of all the accusations of blasphemy made against him by the high and chief priests. There was in the death and resurrection of Christ not the slightest condoning of the wickedness of the religious and political leaders in condemning him to an unjust death.

As a result, having witnessed Jesus' resurrection from the dead, and having heard from witnesses of his resurrection, the Jews and Gentiles were not to continue in opposition to his teachings, but repent of their unbelief, of their scepticism, and

come to terms with his claims regarding the divine origin of his calling, authority, and message. They were not to, as many Protestant believers have thought, replace the summons to return to an original calling for humanity through the commission of Israel with a completely new teaching pertaining to a cosmic defeat of the devil with his claim over humanity wrested from God on account of the disobedience, rebellion, and betrayal perpetrated by Adam and his wife at the Garden of Eden. Contrary to the teaching of some patristic theologians, God did not pay a ransom to the devil, bait the latter using a fishhook, or set a massive mousetrap through the coming and death of Jesus in order to ensnare Satan and compel him to renounce his unjust claims over humanity.⁶ This was a theological overlay that does not cohere with the general thrust of the message of the Bible. Instead, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the teachings of Moses and the persevering example of the prophets in continually preaching those authoritative teachings in the face of tremendous resistance and adversity were given greater credibility and authority, for the divine authority and power of God himself was pressed into service to back the claims of Jesus, as well as his hearty and noble attempt to establish the true and ideal Israel and community of humanity signified in the concept of the Kingdom of God. When Jesus predicted that he would be rejected and given over to death by his own people, it was not a matter-of-fact pronouncement of what God had from the beginning of time

⁶ M. J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 723-25.

decided would happen so as to bring about his purposes for the human race. Quite to the contrary. It was a tragic reversal of fortunes for the long-awaited deliverer of the Jewish people, yet not one completely unexpected, seeing that humankind had fallen into depravity. In spite of his prediction of rejection, Jesus attained victory over the powers of evil and darkness in that he gave himself perseveringly unto death, unto the worst abuses and injustices. He determined to go to Jerusalem, where he knew he would be delivered over to death (Luke 9:51, 21-22). Till the very last moment, as he sought the face of his Father at the Garden of Gethsemane, he did not flinch from his calling to endure the opposition of sinners.

What, then, are we to make of the Pauline references to his death being a kind of atonement for our sins, to reconcile us to God the Father? These arise in the context of testimony to the greatness of the love of God in that he was prepared to make a sacrifice of unimaginable and unfathomable immensity and intensity. The sacrificial imagery was lifted from the ritual practices of the Israelites during the time of Moses and Aaron. An imperative image was derived from the tradition and practice of slaughtering a lamb on the Passover to bring about and commemorate the way in which God had the destroyer pass over or bypass the Israelite households which obeyed the instruction, so that the firstborn of those families would be spared the fate of death they would otherwise face along with the Egyptian families (1 Cor. 5:7). Another illustration came from the Day of

Atonement, on which the high priest would slaughter a bull and a goat as sin offerings for Aaron, his family, and the rest of the Israelites and carry their blood into the most holy place and sprinkle it over the ark of the covenant, in front of the mercy seat, and on the altar, on whose horns the blood would also be placed, and in that way make atonement for the most holy place, the altar, and the entire tent of meeting. It is instructive that the act of making atonement was described not as benefiting the community but as cleansing and consecrating the sanctuary. In a sense, therefore, the death of Jesus, which is compared to the bull and goat sin offering (Heb. 9:11-28), is an act to reveal and preserve the holiness of God and establish, confirm, and vindicate his character. It was not a mechanical procedure through which a wrathful Father could be propitiated through the sacrificial act of the Son. While the death of Christ was described in such terms in Rom. 3:25, the Old Testament imagery strongly suggests, without detracting from the idea of Christ's death as an atoning sacrifice provided by God purely to ease the consciences of guilt-ridden believers, that the main objective in making the sacrifices of the bull and goat sin offerings and also that of the Passover lamb was in order that the wrath of God might be turned away (Passover lamb) that is brought about on account of the uncleanness of the Israelites (bull and goat sin offerings). The problem, then, is not the wrath of God, but the uncleanness of the people of God which, left unaddressed, would certainly earn them divine judgment.

In what does the uncleanness of the people of God consist? It consists in their failure to respect and honour the holiness of God. For that transgression alone, Moses himself was denied passage into the Promised Land of Canaan (Num. 20:12), in spite of his innumerable and undeniable contributions to the community of faith as leader of the Israelites. It is because the holiness of God is degraded by the transgressions of the community of faith that it is necessary for them to do something to restore that regard for his holy character by revealing that in a public manner and preserving it through an act of revealing God's holiness imaged in a ritual sacrifice. When Jesus came, and underwent death, this did not constitute an image but the reality behind that image, because Jesus is the Son of God, and very God. In a very real sense then, Jesus did not come in order to turn away the wrath of an angry God from the world, but to reveal the very character of God the revelation and disclosure of which would serve to purify people of their sin of rebellion and unbelief, things which were sure to earn the judgment of God in a manner of cause and effect. The wrath of God was the state of a person or a people in which God as a righteous judge cannot help but permit the cycle of sin and judgment to run its course and effect devastation and destruction through the action of intermediaries like an angel of destruction (2 Sam. 24:16-17).⁷

In short, there is not strong scriptural support for a mystical view of the atonement of Christ as an instrument to

⁷ Cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Fontana, 1959), 46-50.

rescue believers from the clutches of the devil. While it cannot be denied that God could have entered into a bargain with the devil much as he did with regard to the question of the faithfulness of Job, we need to recognise that the main point of the narrative in the Book of Job was simply for the righteous man to accept that the prerogative as to how God should order the life of the believer is simply God's own, and to desist from seeking justice and a proper explanation from Yahweh God. When he came to the end of human wisdom, Job was given an epiphany of God's creation and beautiful and perfect ordering and economy of all that is in the cosmos. In his sovereign rule, God is able to ensure that the earth was made and wondrously sustained, the sea, the clouds, day and night, snow, rain, hail, the constellations, the survival instinct of animals, with their ability to reproduce, their pride in roaming freely, his ability to bring low the proud, the power of the behemoth and leviathan which God alone is able to tame and which reveal the greater power of God. That revelation of God's powerful sovereignty served only to demonstrate that Job's concerns about whether he was treated justly by God were completely misplaced. He learned from the experience of encountering the works of God that righteousness in the eyes of God entailed much more than mere submission, obedience, and fear of him in light of his faithful protection and provision, but that true trust in God is proven in the midst of situations which seem to challenge those convictions. God did not agree to the game that Satan was trying to play with him at Job's expense

because he was afraid of what Satan might do or say were he to refuse him, but he saw an opportunity and benefit in using Satan's dark ploy and designs regarding Job to test his faith and bring him to a higher level of spiritual maturity. God was in no way beholden to the accuser to allow him to do as he wishes with his people. It is a sheer travesty of God's righteousness to suggest that he was compelled by the devil's ability at argumentation or blackmailing to give in to the accuser in any way. In the same way, God did not send his Son into the world to undergo a humiliating death on the basis that that kind of pain and suffering was the only means by which he could reconcile his own justice and compassion. At the cross, God was neither attempting to reconcile his majesty with the claims of the devil nor put an end to the sin-aroused conflict of two inherent qualities within him; again, as in the case of Job, he merely saw the opportunity in the crucifixion of Christ to demonstrate and safeguard his holiness among people in the world. He allowed a humiliating death to befall Jesus simply because he was anticipating the glorious faith that that event and example would serve to inspire in the hearts of those who would come to call upon the name of the Lord.

What kind of meaning and application would the cross of Christ have for us today? We suggest that the life and ministry of Christ be considered alongside his death because in a very real sense it is only through his life and teachings that we can truly appreciate the import of his sacrificial death. What, then, does the life and ministry of Christ mean for us today? In the fourth, fifth,