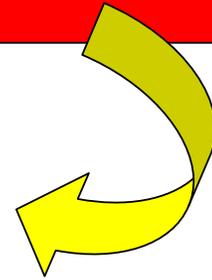
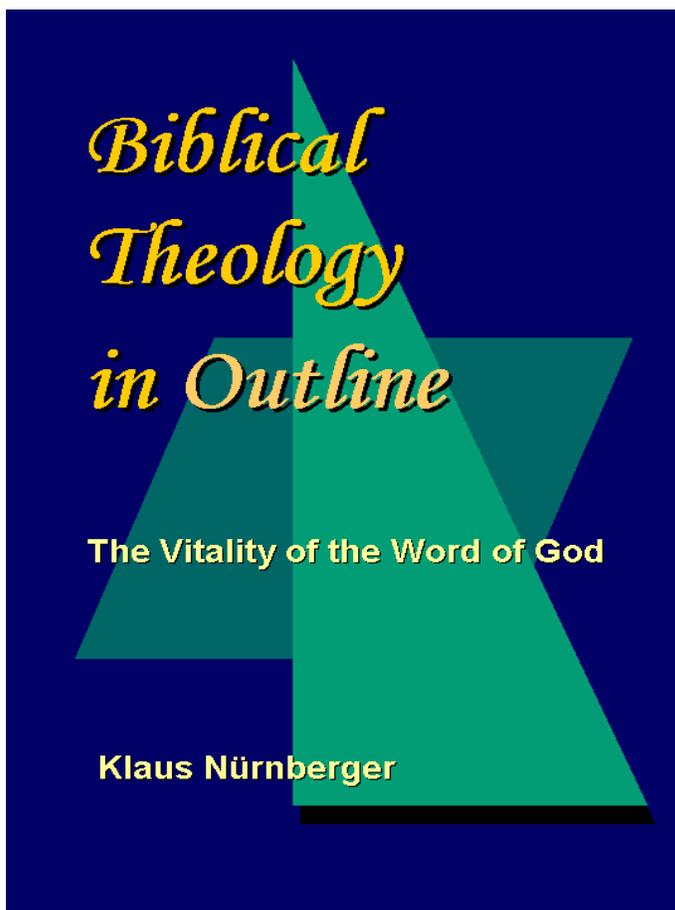


*Two fascinating chapters
taken from this book*

Chapter 2 on responsible reading

Chapter 9 on the king as God's representative



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Key words

biblical interpretation, biblical theology,
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Description of the book

The Word of God is God's redemptive response to human needs. The 'people of God' needed progeny, liberation, land, leadership, moral guidance, healing, belonging, reassurance. Narratives of God's redemptive interventions emerged and evolved during a millennium of biblical history. Insights in God's redemptive purposes grew, culminated in the Christ event and were lured into the future by God's vision of ultimate fulfilment.

Description of chapter 2 on responsible reading

Is the Bible perfect and without errors because it is the inspired Word of God? Or is it a collection of ancient documents without significance for us today? According to the biblical witness God entered imperfect and sinful human reality to transform it from within. It is imperative that Christians subject all human authority to divine scrutiny – including the biblical witness.

Key words

Biblical interpretation, biblical authority, biblical critique, divine inspiration, biblical inerrancy, Christian freedom, responsible reading, transformation, sola Scriptura.

Description of chapter 9 on the king as God's representative

Biblical insights in God's redemptive purposes evolved in history in response to human needs. According to Psalm 2, the king is God's adopted son, that is, the representative of God on earth. Israelite prophets have challenged idolatrous and unjust kings with the vision of a messianic king. When applied to Jesus, the image of the son of God changed from oppressor to Servant, paving the way for democratic assumptions.

Key words

Son of God, Davidic king, Christ the king, Christ the servant, oppressive rule, democratic rule, evolution of the Word of God.

Chapter 2

Critique

Dealing responsibly with authoritative documents

Prompts

1. According to 1 Sam 15, Saul was rejected by God because he did not wipe out the Amalekites - men, women, children and livestock. The reason was that their forebears had obstructed the journey of the Israelites to Canaan many centuries earlier. Can Christians accept this story as a reflection of the will of God?
2. According to Gen 1, heaven and earth came into being when God created a dome which separated the ocean above the dome from the ocean below the dome. The sun, moon and stars were fixed to this dome to separate the day from the night. Are these statements acceptable as scientific descriptions of reality?

The problem

The Christian faith depends on the biblical witness. But the form and the contents of the biblical documents are not unproblematic. Some believers take them as the *inspired Word of God* which we must believe regardless of their contents and obey regardless of the consequences. If we do not, it is argued, we have opted against God and lost our faith.

Others dismiss them as *a collection of religious texts* taken from some ancient and obsolete cultures, which cannot be taken too seriously in modern times. In this chapter I argue that both these approaches are inappropriate. God expects us to be mature believers who are able to deal with the Scriptures in a responsible, that is, in a discerning and critical way.

First impressions

Before we look at the two options stated above, let us look at the Bible itself. We know only partially, Paul confessed, as if we were looking into a mirror (1 Cor 13:12f). A mirror in Paul's time yielded a very dim reflection. Newcomers to the biblical faith will probably agree with him. Anybody who is handed a Bible and begins to read for the first time, without guidance from seasoned believers, is likely to be lost in a maze. The Bible is certainly not the most accessible book on the market.

It is not just the profundity of the message which perplexes us, but also its complex and disorganized form. There are seemingly alternative versions of the same story, seemingly conflicting world views, seemingly contradictory theological statements, seemingly untenable scientific assumptions, seemingly unethical commandments, seemingly variable terminologies.

The material is arranged neither in historical, nor in systematic sequence. Often one finds different layers of meaning in the same text, or various versions of the same message in different texts. Looking more closely, we discover narratives, laws, prophecies, songs, exhortations, genealogies, aphorisms and parables which stem from various times, historical situations and cultural backgrounds in the Ancient Near East.

That is a cluster of situations very far away and very long ago! Our contemporaries no longer speak the kind of language which was prevalent in the Ancient Near East. If we believers were not so used to the actual form of the Bible, we would also be put off by it, as hundreds of thousands of people indeed are, provided they still bother to read the Bible at all. The claim that the Bible has no imperfections does not seem to tally with the facts.

Believers could argue that the truth of God is so deep and so complex that it surpasses our capacity to understand. But that would defeat the purpose of revelation. Why speak at all if what is spoken does not communicate? Non-believers could argue that, if God had really wanted to speak to us through a written document, he should have provided us with a straight forward, organized and lucid statement. Revelation is, after all, supposed to enlighten, not to puzzle. But that is not the impression we get when reading the Bible.

It is also hard to argue that the Bible is sufficient as a source of truth. The Bible provides no answers to a host of contemporary problems, such as economic globalization, nuclear weapons, ecological deterioration, the manipulation of genes, digital information systems, human rights, psychological traumata, and so on. All these things were beyond the horizons of ancient authors. But for us today, answers to these questions are essential for our physical, social and spiritual well-being - some of them even for our survival!

The longer, the deeper and the more honest one investigates, the stronger the impression becomes that, in the Bible, many generations of ancient believers have piled up a baroque collection of faith statements stemming from many different situations over long periods of time. In short, for any unbiased observer, there can be no doubt that the Bible is the product of a long and messy human history. What do we make of that as believers?

Believers do not accept the Bible as it stands

The first thing to note is that Christians do not, in fact, take the Bible literally as it stands, and have never done so. The Bible is such a complex body of literature that it is virtually impossible to base one's faith and life on every verse found in the Bible. Believers have always selected or prioritized certain texts and interpreted them according to their own faith assumptions.

The result is that *the most diverse doctrines and patterns of behavior* have been deduced from biblical texts - from Hellenistic Gnosticism to Jewish-Christian legalism, from Roman Catholicism to Jehovah's Witnesses. All those who have been branded heretics by those who considered themselves orthodox have based their stances on the Scriptures. The appeal to the Bible as such does not seem to have safeguarded the truth.

Having burnt its fingers over and over again, the church did not, in fact, consider the Bible to be a sufficient and reliable guide to the Christian faith. To safeguard the truth, it appointed teachers, preachers and overseers; it defined the essence of the Christian faith in creeds; it developed elaborate dogmatic systems; it wrote denominational confessions. Even the most ardent Evangelicals find it necessary to provide devotional literature which they expect to be read over and above the Bible.

There is an *implicit critique* of the biblical text in such precautions. They are all designed to clarify the biblical witness and cut out misunderstandings. The Bible, it seems, cannot be trusted to fend for itself. But that would be a wrong impression. In fact, critique is found in the biblical scriptures themselves. Prophets critiqued kings, priests and other prophets. Jesus critiqued Jewish Sabbath regulations. Paul critiqued the primacy of the law. As this book intends to show, inner-biblical critique is one of the most significant characteristics of the biblical witness.

The same implicit critique is found in our personal spirituality. We may select those texts which make sense to us and leave aside the others. We appreciate parts of the Psalms, for instance, which emphasize trust in God, and ignore those which request the destruction of enemies. We may spiritualize biblical statements: Israel's liberation from slavery becomes liberation from personal sins; the conquest of Canaan becomes an evangelistic drive; the expected messianic empire becomes the kingdom of God in our hearts.

This shows that even committed believers, who hear God speaking in these documents, do not, in fact, take every word of Scripture literally as it stands. Nor should they! They have to ask what God actually wants to tell them in and through these texts. If they listen perceptively, they will not feel entitled to conquer a country and drive out its inhabitants. They will not sacrifice their first-born sons in Jerusalem. They will not sell everything they have and become dependent on charity. Every responsible believer reading a text must go beyond the text and ask what God really wants to say. But the question what God really wants to say in the text is an implicit critique of the reliability and sufficiency of the text itself.

And this critique is important! Devoted Bible readers have come to all kinds of weird conclusions. They have assumed dictatorial powers, waged crusades and holy wars, burnt heretics at the stake, calculated dates for the end of the world, panicked about their prospects of spending eternity in hell, condemned scientists for their new discoveries, excommunicated critics, formed ever new splinter churches, persecuted people of other faiths, castrated themselves, discriminated against women, practiced slavery - and all these things on account of biblical texts!

The lesson to be learnt is that we dare not take everything written in the Bible as valid and binding for us. We must use our critical faculties to discern what the will of God really is. And we must do that together, so that we can enrich and correct each other.

Non-believers may be put off

So much for the use of the Bible by believers. What about non-believers? Remember that non-believers are always potential believers. So we should not condemn them too quickly, but take their difficulties seriously! They probably look at the Bible in the way it presents itself to any outside reader, namely as an ancient collection of religious documents, a product of human history among many others of its kind.

If you approach the Bible in this way, you will probably not understand why it should be particularly authoritative for us today. But why then read it at all? If you are interested in antiquity, the Bible may fascinate you, along with the Odyssey and the Bhagavad-Gita; if not, you may get bored and forget about it altogether.

A real possibility is, therefore, that *people turn to more accessible and more plausible guides to life*, such as the popular "how-to" literature found in any general book store. There are probably more Bibles in the world that are never read, than Bibles that are. And there are probably more people put off by the postulate of biblical sanctity and inerrancy than persuaded by it.

I cannot help but sympathize with them. Modern civilization is committed to evidence, plausibility and integrity. A simple claim to authority no longer

convinces us. And rightly so! Why should a God, who is supposed to stand for truth and integrity, demand the sacrifice of one's God-given faculties of observation and reason? It just does not make sense!

Yet, for better or for worse, the Christian faith is built on the biblical witness. *Believers hear God speaking to them* through these ancient documents. And this is precisely where the problem is located. While it is clear that the texts are human, there is a strange quality to the contents of the texts which believers recognize as divine. How can we understand this contradiction? We seem to be caught between a rock and a hard place. Either the Bible is the Word of God, then we must accept as it stands; or it is not, then we can forget about it! But there is a third alternative: *responsible reading!*

The freedom of the sons and daughters of God

According to Paul, Christians are not meant to be slaves of a written text or a code of laws, whether it makes sense or not, whether it has beneficial or detrimental consequences. Paul contrasts letters written on tablets of stone with the Spirit working in our hearts (2 Cor 3). He also contrasts slaves and children with adults who have come of age (Gal 3:23-4:7). We should be childlike in humility, trust and innocence, but not childish in our understanding (1 Cor 14:20; Mt 18:1-5; Lk 18:17). Paul wants us to test everything and keep what is best (1 Thess 5:21). The Old Testament prophets, Jesus and Paul have done just that. And they are, after all, our examples.

Christians are not supposed to be minors or slaves. They are supposed to be mature and responsible sons and daughters of God, who share in God's authority, love and vision. As mature sons and daughters of God, Christians are called upon to share the freedom, the authority and the responsibility of the Son of God. The Son of God is the representative and plenipotentiary of God on earth. He has divine authority! And Christ is the first-born among many sons and daughters of God, into whose image they are to be transformed (Rom 8:29; Jn 1:12f; 14:3; 2 Cor 3:17f; Eph 2:6; 1 Cor 6:2f).

Responsibility means that you take charge of something that is entrusted to your care and account for the way you deal with it. Say parents entrust their child, their most valued possession, to a nanny. The nanny has to exercise authority over the child. But she also has to account for what she has been doing when the parents come home. Responsibility implies both *authority and accountability*. You are in control, but you know that your charge belongs to somebody else.

God has entrusted us, the believers, with the proclamation of the Word of God. When we exercise that mandate, we are fully in control of what we are doing. It is our proclamation, formulated by us, conveyed *by us* to others. Yet

we know that it is *God's* Word that we are supposed to proclaim. We have to account for what we are doing with it. We are like the servants in the parable to whom his master entrusted various amounts of money to work with in his absence (Mt 25:14-30). That is what responsibility means.

We derive the contents of the Word of God from the biblical Scriptures. This implies that the biblical Scriptures themselves have been entrusted to our care. We work with the Scriptures, analyze them, scrutinize them, extract the contents of the Word of God from them, and proclaim it in a form which can make sense to our contemporaries. They must become able to give account for what they believe (Eph 4:11-16; Jn 15:15; 1 Pet 3:15; Col 4:6). The ten talents we receive must be turned into a hundred talents. The correct response to revelation is not slavish obedience but maturity and responsibility.

If we were to submit to everything written in the Bible just as it stands, regardless of the contents, and oblivious of the consequences, we would act like the slave who buried the talent entrusted to his care. We would be too lazy, or too scared, to look more closely, to ask any questions, to extract the intended meaning, to reformulate it in a modern idiom. In short, we would abdicate our responsibility.

Many Christians remain anxious and submissive to authority. They are caught up in a dependency syndrome - which is not what Christ came to achieve among us. Moreover, it is the Word of God which suffers. It is the Word of God that must be liberated from these fetters. And that can only happen if its carriers are emancipated and empowered by God. For the sake of our integrity and for the sake of our witness to the world, let us get clarity on what it is that blocks our growth into maturity!

Authoritarianism is a product of human history

The doctrine which intimidates devout Christians into subservience was formulated *during an authoritarian age*, when leaders did not tolerate any insubordination on the side of their subjects.

Early forms of the authoritarian stance can be found in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The classical form of Christian authoritarianism is found in Roman Catholicism. The reason for this is that the institutional shape of the Catholic church was formed in a feudal context. The adoption of a feudal structure by the church had its advantages at the time. When the Western Roman Empire disintegrated, for instance, it was the church that maintained a semblance of order. But when times changed, and called for emancipated responsibility, the structure persisted. The Catholic hierarchy with its layers of authority is a replica of the social structure of mediaeval Europe. And the impact of this structure and its ideological (or theological)

legitimation can still be felt even in Protestant churches today. Let us sketch its history briefly.

According to classical Catholicism, both the Scriptures and the 'oral tradition' have been entrusted by Christ to the apostles, who entrusted them to their successors, the bishops. The apostles, thus the bishops, have been given the Spirit, who would "guide them into all truth" (Jn 16:13). You cannot question the authority of the Scriptures, because they have been written by the apostles, who were inspired by the Spirit. You can also not question the authority of the tradition, developed by the bishops, because by doing so, you would question the authority of the Spirit, thus of Christ, thus of God.

The bishop of Rome, the pope, is taken to be the successor of Peter, the 'prince of the apostles'. As the representative of Christ himself (*vicarius Christi*), he is entitled to rule over the church. Every member of the church must submit to his authority. The pope can consult his subordinates, but he is not obliged to do so. He can formulate doctrines which are deemed to be binding for Christendom as a whole. When the pope proclaims a new doctrine on behalf of the church and in his official capacity (*ex cathedra*), he is taken to be infallible. Nobody is entitled to question the doctrines of the church thus promulgated, including the doctrine of the infallibility of the pope as such. Neither can it be changed.

The ambivalent stance in Protestantism

Protestants do not accept these assumptions. By the time of the Reformation, the church had become so corrupt that many believers realized that a radical renewal was overdue. These included many of those who wanted to remain loyal to the church and its institutions, such as Erasmus of Rotterdam and Ignatius of Loyola. Luther too wanted a renewal of the church, but his challenges were met with the heavy hand of both the ecclesial and the secular authorities of his time. Luther was excommunicated and placed under the ban of the German Empire.

Due to this experience, the Reformers came to the conclusion that the claims of the Roman establishment to holiness and infallibility were spurious. Protestants rejected the authority of the pope and the Catholic doctrinal tradition. In line with the humanist battle cry "back to the sources" (*ad fontes*), they declared that the Scriptures were the only authority to be recognized in the church of Christ.

For Luther this authority lay in the fact that he had found the gospel of Christ in the Scriptures, not in the church's traditions. So for him the gospel of God's redeeming grace in Christ, in contradistinction to the sin-exposing function of the law, became the criterion of the truth of the Word of God, even within the Scriptures themselves. He did not think much, for instance, of the letter of James because he could not discern the gospel in that letter.

But Luther's critical approach got lost. In the intense rivalry which developed between Catholics and Protestants during the 16th and 17th centuries, Protestant theologians tried to draw up a doctrinal system which could hold its own against its Catholic counterpart. We call this school of thought Protestant Orthodoxy. The Catholic claim to authority and infallibility was endorsed, but restricted to the Scriptures, thus cutting out the authority of the hierarchy, the pope and the dogmatic tradition (*sola Scriptura*).

The argument of Protestant Orthodoxy runs roughly as follows. Because the Scriptures are inspired, God is their author. God is perfect; so his Word must be perfect. God cannot lie; so his Word cannot contain mistakes. God is eternal; so his Word cannot be subject to the flux of time and the variability of human situations. God has conveyed his perfect Word to the biblical authors by a special miracle, the miracle of inspiration. This miracle overruled the human imperfections of the biblical authors. So the Scriptures contain absolute truth. They are without error both in form and content. They are equally valid for all times and situations. Because the Scriptures are the only Word of God, they must be entirely clear in themselves, sufficient for our salvation and effective in bringing it about. The inerrancy and authority of the Pope is replaced with the inerrancy and authority of a book.

But Protestant Orthodoxy contradicts itself. While it says that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, which is absolutely clear and sufficient, it also says that we need the Holy Spirit to disclose what God wants to say to us in the Bible, the "internal testimony of the Holy Spirit". So the Bible on its own is, after all, not clear, nor sufficient, nor effective. The problem is that the Holy Spirit is also mediated through the human spirit. The Old Testament, the New Testament and the Reformation all warn us that we should not believe every spirit. We must test all claims to inspiration against the "external Word", that is, the text of the Scriptures. So we are caught up in a circular argument.

There are other flaws in the argument as well. Protestant Orthodoxy conceded, for instance, that Christ superseded the old dispensation, that the ritual law came to an end in Christ, that Christians should not hate their enemies. Later some proponents of the doctrine even spoke of a 'history of revelation', or 'progressive revelation' or a 'history of salvation'. But historical awareness always undermines assumption of timeless validity and sufficiency.

But the dawning insight that texts are embedded in ongoing human history was not taken to its logical conclusion either. Where New Testament texts gave readers a good conscience to move beyond Old Testament texts, God himself seemed to have changed his mind. However, where no New Testament verses were found which superseded Old Testament texts, for instance in the case of the creation of the world in six days (Gen 1), the Old

Testament texts were still taken to reflect the eternal truth of God. In other words, inner-biblical critique was accepted as part of a divinely inspired Scripture, but it did not give the readers the authority to do what the biblical authors themselves did.

The doctrine of Protestant Orthodoxy is the root of all contemporary claims to the inerrancy of Scriptures found in Protestantism. Thus Protestantism was left with a 'paper pope', as some unkind commentators remarked. It was taken over by the Pietistic movement, and found its way through the revival movements and the missionary movements into our times.

Look first, then come to your conclusions!

In the mean time, some facts exposed by modern critique - for instance that the earth is round, not flat, or that differences occur in manuscripts found by archaeological research - have forced the proponents of inerrancy to qualify their assumptions and they did so in a great variety of ways. The inerrancy school is no longer of one mind about the matter. But the basic assumptions were not abandoned. It is these which must be scrutinized.

Different approaches to a text produce different results. It makes a difference whether one departs from a set of doctrinal assumptions or from actual faith experiences. Protestant Orthodoxy and its offshoots today use the doctrinal method. They constantly refer to the Bible, but they normally quote verses from all over the Bible as they seem to fit into the trend of the argument. In practice, therefore, it is doctrine, not the Bible, nor the Spirit, which functions as the criterion of truth in Protestantism.

Where then does this doctrine come from? We can easily see that the argument of Protestant Orthodoxy departs from a primary assumption from which a number of deductions are made. If this is true, then that must be true. This is typical for the deductive method. The logic of the argument seems to be flawless. But a flawless logic does not necessarily lead to correct insights. The basic assumption can be in conflict with reality, and then the logic may yield untenable results. Human beings are fallible - even in their faith assumptions and their logical arguments!

It is not safe, therefore, to draw conclusions from untested assumptions. We call this approach *deduction*. It is much safer to start with actual experiences and test any conclusions you arrive at against actual experience. We call this approach *induction*. That is how modern sciences operate - and for very good reasons! We need an experiential approach, because speculation can lead us astray.

Why not look at the texts themselves first, establish their historical context, analyze their contents, scrutinize what they are saying, figure out

what their message could be for us today, before making far-reaching statements about the character of the Bible?

Why not look at our own faith experience first? What we experience, and what the biblical authors experienced, is the vulnerability, temptability and fallibility of our human nature and the power of God's transforming action within human reality. That is true even for an apostle such as Paul, the oldest and most prolific author of the New Testament, the apostle on whose insights the Reformation was based (Phil 3:12; 2 Cor 4:7ff; 1 Cor 13:12). It is also true for Peter, the rock on which Christ wanted to build his church (Mat 16:23), the apostle on whose office Catholicism is based.

And this vulnerability and fallibility of human nature is as true for the biblical faith as a whole as it is true for individual believers. That much we can gather from an unbiased reading of the texts! It is indeed said in the Bible that the Scriptures are inspired. *But inspiration does not imply inerrancy!* We too hope to be inspired when we preach and write the Word of God, but this does not make us infallible!

The Bible testifies over and over again that humans are sinful and fallible, including the great heroes of faith, such as Moses, David, Elijah, Peter and Paul. It also testifies that God, in his infinite grace, uses such sinful and fallible human beings to bring about his redemption both in them and through them. We all need to be transformed, not only in our motivations, but also in our insights and convictions. In the case of the biblical faith as a whole the process took hundreds of years and it will reach its fulfillment only in the coming kingdom of God. That is what Paul tells us (1 Cor 13:8-12; 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 3:12-16).

There is a further consideration which is equally important. The readers of the Bible are also not infallible! We all know this. Misunderstandings and misrepresentations of the biblical witness abound, not only among the laity but also among trained theologians. If the Holy Spirit was able to create perfect authors, why does he not create perfect readers? Or alternatively, why does he not place God's truth straight into our hearts and minds without the help of human instruments such as reading, writing, preaching and hearing?

God acts redemptively through imperfect human beings

It is clear that this is not how the God in whom we believe chose to work. According to the biblical witness, God always works through his creatures: through sunshine, rain, wind, fire, drought, fertility, conflict, war - and also through human insight! God apparently wants to involve humans quite personally in the process of communicating his redeeming truth. We are not typewriters or computers, but living beings. We are also sinners whom God wants to transform. We become witnesses of God's redemption and

transformation *precisely by being redeemed and transformed*. And according to Paul that is as true of the authors of the Bible as it for us (2 Cor 3:18).

So let us take this problem back to our God. What if our God actually wanted to enter human history in all its ambiguity and confusion - and transform it from within? What if the Bible itself provided evidence for the fact that God in his mercy found people where they were, and led them where he wanted them to go? What if the "good news" actually means that God himself, and therefore his messenger, became a Jew to the Jews to win over the Jews (1 Cor 9:19-23)?

The real miracle of God expressed by the gospel of Christ is God's love - God's forgiveness, God's transformation of the sinner, God's redemption of the enslaved, God's search for the lost, God's healing of the sick. God accepts the unacceptable to transform them. Part of what makes us unacceptable is our limited or faulty insight. The demand that people first sacrifice their God-given powers of observation and reason and dump their insights before they can become true believers, makes the gospel of Christ conditional, thus reversing the message of God's unconditional, redeeming acceptance of the unacceptable in Christ.

In other words, the doctrine of inerrancy obscures the scandal of the cross by setting up a false scandal. It is the scandal of the demand that we take the cultural and historical trappings of the biblical message for eternal and inerrant truth, while they are, in fact, historically and culturally relative. That is idolatry! It is also a new law. Biblical critique removes these false demands and liberates educated believers from spiritual straight-jackets. It restores the intellectual integrity of those who proclaim the Word of God. It enhances the credibility of the Word of God for secular hearers and readers.

In this book we intend to show that, according to the biblical witness, God enters human reality at a given time and in a given situation, picks up humans as he finds them, and transforms their insights, their motivations, and their understanding of his will for his world. This seems to be the overall pattern of God's redemptive action in this world. God does not provide us with an eternal truth which fell from heaven once upon a time and which is immune against human imperfections.

What about Christ?

It is often argued that, if the biblical authors cannot be perfect, because they are human, Jesus could not have been perfect either, because he too was human. Note that this is, again, a logical deduction from an untested assumption. Who says that what is true for Christ must be true for all the biblical authors of the Old and the New Testaments? The question is not what God could have done, but what God has, in fact, done. As we have seen

above, he has not provided us with a perfect Scripture, and seemingly for very good reasons. But what about Christ?

Hebrews 2:10-18 says that, for Christ to become the pioneer of salvation, he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, except for sin. He had to share the human condition (flesh and blood) and had to be made perfect through suffering. Heb 5:7-10 likewise states that, during his earthly days, Jesus struggled with God in agony, that he learnt obedience and that he was made perfect through suffering. Perfection was not a condition of the earthly Jesus, but a goal which prompted a process. And it is the process he had to go through into which we are to be involved (Heb 2:10,18).

Similarly Paul distinguishes between life before death (life in the flesh) and the gift of a new life through resurrection (life in the Spirit). He says that Christ who knew of no sin, became sin for us, so that we would become righteousness in him (2 Cor 5:21; Rom 8:3f). Christ underwent a process so that we could join him in this process. We once knew Christ according to the flesh, Paul says, but we know him like that no longer, because through resurrection he became a new creation (2 Cor 5:16-17). It is the risen Lord who "is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:17-18).

Through faith we can participate in this new creation now. By identifying with his death to the flesh we anticipate our own deaths (Rom 6) and by identifying with his new life we anticipate our own new lives. By doing so, we are transformed into his image (2 Cor 3:18). But this does not mean that we reach perfection in this life (Phil 3:12-16). To claim inerrancy for any human being this side of the grave is not in line with Paul's theology. And we can be certain that the biblical authors were this side of the grave when they wrote the biblical documents.

Christ became human so as to redeem and transform humanity from within. And that is also true for his messengers. Paul says that, to have a share in the gospel of Christ, he had to become a Jew to the Jews and a Gentile to the Gentiles (1 Cor 9:19-23). This is what God himself did. The Word became flesh, that is, human reality (Jn 1:14). In biblical times, God picked up people where they were, in their cultural contexts, their religious convictions, their worldview assumptions and their self-interests, and led them in the direction of where he wanted them to be. And he is doing exactly the same thing among us today.

Critique is part of the transformative process

In line with this general trend, it is those who are confused, who cannot make sense of their situation, who long for meaning and guidance and authority, that are led to deeper insight and reassurance, step by step, over long periods of time, to the degree that they can take it (1 Cor 3:1-4; Heb 5:11-14). In all these cases we observe transformative processes, not

conditions of perfection. The Spirit of God attacks sin so as to establish righteousness. Similarly it exposes error so as to establish valid insight. It did so during biblical times as much as it does so today.

Transformation presupposes that the old is dismantled, so that the new can emerge. Transformation is a never-ending process in which our parents in the faith have been involved as much as we are today. Therefore an appropriate understanding of the Word of God in its dynamic, transformative action demands the ongoing critique of its human instruments, not for the sake of dismantling the truth, but for the sake of gaining the truth. Here are a few examples:

- There was a time when rulers believed that they were entitled to subdue, oppress and exploit other people as representatives of God on earth (Psalm 2). But there also came a time when subjugation and oppression was recognized for what it was: a pagan practice that was not in line with God's redeeming action in Christ (Mk 10:35-45).
- There was a time when the people of God felt constrained to drive out or kill off the inhabitants of the land they wanted to occupy, because they were a threat to their identity, survival and prosperity (Deut 7). But there came a time when it became clear that the biblical God was a God of all human beings and that Jews and Gentiles were granted equal access to the one people of God (Eph 2).
- There was a time when it was believed that a father had the right to sell even his own daughter into slavery (Ex 21). But there also came a time when it became clear that in the new humanity, the humanity purposed by God in Christ, all people have the same dignity (Gal 3:28).

Now imagine that we would take Psalm 2, or Exodus 21, or Deut 7 as the eternally and universally valid Word of God and applied it to our contemporary situation. Would this be an expression of obedience? Would it be a manifestation of the redeeming love of God for his suffering creatures? I think you will agree that this cannot be true.

This has practical repercussions. *What we cannot critique in the Bible we can also not critique in our own times.* So we would have to condone slavery, conquest, genocide, oppression, male dominance and gender discrimination simply because we find such behavior in the Bible. Instead of being emboldened by the increasing discernment of the people of God in biblical times to overcome wrong attitudes and social evils, we would be paralyzed by texts which seem to legitimate or demand such unacceptable attitudes and acts.

So there we are: the Bible is not the perfect embodiment of an eternal truth, but a collection of documents which witness to an earthly pilgrimage in which God transforms human perceptions in the direction of God's ultimate vision. To pretend that there are no problems within the biblical witness does not help to make its message more credible. Make-believe is not a Christian

virtue! If there are contradictions, obsolete assumptions, or unacceptable attitudes in the Bible, we must acknowledge them and see how God wants to correct them. There is simply no other way!

Critique is not an arrogant rejection of the authority of the Word of God, therefore, but the sincere endeavor to find an appropriate understanding of the Word of God. Critique is in line with the cross: what is not acceptable to God has to go! The Greek word *krinein* means to differentiate, to discern, to judge between what is appropriate and what is not. It is precisely the urge to discern God's redemptive will that constrains us to subject the biblical texts to critique. It has to be done - in obedience to God. And what has to be done, can be done with a good conscience!

Now let us get on with the job

After we have cleared doctrinal misconceptions out of the way, we can be much more relaxed. We do not have to defend the Bible, but open ourselves to what it actually says. We do not have to call right what is wrong. We do not need to be afraid that a critique of God's instruments is tantamount to a critique of God. We can have a realistic look at the human nature of the biblical witness without fear that we will thereby lose its divine message. To point out the human inadequacies of the biblical texts will not destroy our faith, but make our faith more mature, more versatile and more responsible. If not, it was based on wrong foundations.

So let us do with confidence what has to be done in any case if the Word of God is to develop its full power in us and through us. Professional theologians have developed a great variety of critical tools. For average Bible readers, however, three levels of critique should be of particular interest:

- *Historical critique* makes us aware of the location of the content and form of a text in its own historical and situational settings. This includes social relations and worldview assumptions which changed and continue to change over time. What difference does it make, for instance, that a text may have been written during the Babylonian exile and not during the time of Moses?
- *Ideology critique* makes us aware of the fact that distorted human insight is often used to legitimate the pursuit of personal and collective self-interest at the expense of others. Psalm 2 is an example of how religion can be used to legitimate authoritarian rule.
- *Theological critique* makes us aware of the fact that the text, its original meaning and its subsequent readings can be theologically problematic in terms of the thrust of the biblical faith as a whole. Thus Psalm 2 has been superseded by Mark 10:35-45 and John 13:1-17. It also makes us aware of the fact that the motivations of the readers can be in conflict with God's will.

Let us summarize

God's Word is mediated through human words, actions, attitudes and community life. Because human beings are not perfect, omniscient, or sinless, critique is *theologically legitimate and indispensable*. This is as true for the authors of the biblical documents, as it is for their readers. Both may be guided by the Spirit, but the Spirit always picks us up where we are and transforms our insights, attitudes and behavior.

Biblical critique is biblically legitimate because the biblical authors themselves witness to the vulnerability and fallibility of even the most prominent biblical heroes. They themselves practice critique of biblical texts, and do that throughout the Bible. This inner-biblical critique reveals God's initiatives to transform a fallible and sinful humanity, a process into which he wants to involve us too.

Questions

1. *Revision: Can you describe and critique the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scriptures on the basis of God's redemptive enterprise?*
2. *Application: (a) Some elders in your parish maintain that women should not be allowed to speak during the Annual General Meeting, because Paul said that they should keep quiet in the assembly. (b) You overhear a white person say that blacks in South Africa are under the curse of Ham and predestined to serve whites. How would you deal with such 'biblically based' views?*
3. *(a) "Theology is an invention of the devil to destroy the faith of the people of God. Your attempt to undermine biblical authority with clever arguments, while posing as a believer, is a glaring example." (b) "What you are trying to say, namely that the Bible is so much obsolete rubbish, has been common knowledge for centuries now. What surprises me is that you continue to assume that these documents must contain some supernatural truth or other!" How would you respond to these statements?*

[Continues with chapter 9 on the next page.]

Chapter 9

The king as God's representative on earth

Prompts

- 1. If we believe that Christ is our Lord and Master, is it appropriate to apply democratic decision making procedures in the church of Christ?*
- 2. Is the 'kingdom of God' something purely spiritual, which we have to detect in our hearts, or does it also refer to the political and the economic dimensions of life?*

Our task in this chapter

The royal-imperial paradigm is, together with exodus-conquest and covenant-law, one of the three central paradigms of salvation in the biblical witness. In the Ancient Near East, the king was taken to be an agent of salvation because he was believed to be the representative of God on earth through whom God exercised his authority, maintained the cosmic order and channeled his blessings.

Because of its political connotations, the paradigm was affected, more than any other, by the changing fortunes of Israel as a political entity. It is all the more remarkable that the early church (except Hebrews) saw in Jesus neither a prophet nor a priest, but a king - the messianic king promised by God in the Old Testament. We are here confronted with the very core of the Christian faith! Let us try to trace the trajectory of the paradigm through biblical history.

Section I: The classical period

The origins of the kingship in Israel

As in other traditional societies the most basic authority in Israel was the clan-head. The formation and consolidation of tribes called first for the institution of tribal elders and then for the sporadic appointment of certain 'judges' and military leaders whose authority was based on common respect. This arrangement was not very effective. The continuing menace of Philistine raids in the region, particularly, called for the institution of a centralized authority. The kingship had long been in operation in other Ancient Near Eastern societies and it seemed to lend itself to the purpose.

In the Ancient Near East the king was much more than a political leader, administrator and commander. He was seen as the representative of God on earth, thus the mediator between heaven and earth. He was the mainspring of the life, the power, the prosperity and the prestige of the nation. Only under his reign the nation could achieve shalom (peace in the sense of comprehensive well-being). Outside this umbrella the people were lost, like sheep without a shepherd.

Psalms 72 gives an impression of the comprehensiveness of the blessings expected to be bestowed on the people, other nations and the natural order through the king. The king was, for all intents and purposes, the central religious figure. Priests, prophets and diviners only supplemented his role.

After the interlude of Saul's reign, which still resembled those of the 'judges' in many ways, David ushered in a new era. The political lull in Egypt and Mesopotamia at the time, the longing of the Hebrew tribes for peace and security, and his personal charisma enabled David to establish a Near Eastern Empire of considerable extent and power.

Depending not on the tribal levy, but on his private mercenaries, he defeated the Philistines, got himself appointed king by the tribal elders, first of the Southern tribes led by Judah, then by those of the Northern tribes led by Ephraim. He then conquered the Jebusite town of Jerusalem, which was located between these two tribal groupings and made it his capital. In time he subjugated all other non-Israelite peoples in the region.

Jerusalem and Mount Zion

The Davidic kingship was inseparably linked to Jerusalem. David was king three times over: of Judah, of Israel and of Jerusalem. Jerusalem had been a Canaanite town which David had conquered with his private group of warriors. No tribe could lay claim to it. So Jerusalem was, in the literal sense of the word, the "city of David", his personal possession, thus also the city of his successors.

It was to be expected that, to consolidate the kingdom, David's son Solomon, who led the Davidic empire to its full glory and power, would build the state sanctuary on the highest point in the city, rather than at more ancient Israelite sites such as Bethel or Shiloh, or on one of the mountains on which God was believed to have revealed himself, such as Seir, Horeb, or Sinai.

For much the same reasons Josiah, who had the ambition to restore the Davidic-Solomonic kingdom, concentrated all cultic activities in Jerusalem. The sanctuary then attracted all symbols of the Israelite faith upon itself - including the Sinaitic covenant and the torah.

Psalm 48 is an example how intimately Yahweh, the temple, the Davidic king and the city were identified. The other kings are struck with awe at its sight. Its fortifications are a sign of divine presence. It is the centre of global power. In view of the rather inconspicuous and vulnerable nature of the historic town, these claims are extraordinary, just as extraordinary as the Israelite claim to be the chosen people of God and the Davidic king to be the representative of God on earth, thus the global ruler.

In the mean time, the Davidic-Solomonic empire had split in two and Jerusalem had become the political and cultic centre of the kingdom of Judah. The capital of the (Northern) kingdom of Israel was Samaria and the main religious centre was Bethel. In their intense rivalry, each of these centres questioned the legitimacy of the other. After the destruction of the Northern kingdom, Jerusalem was the only centre left - until the Babylonians also laid this city to waste.

But that was not the end of its fame. When the Persians allowed a religious dependency to be established on the Jewish 'holy site', Jerusalem was rebuilt and became the cultic centre of the Jewish diaspora. By the time of the Priestly Source, that is, after the exile, Jerusalem had come to be seen as the goal of the entire journey of the people of Israel from its patriarchal beginnings, via the exodus and Sinai to the "place that Yahweh had chosen for his name to dwell." Moriah, the location of the sacrifice of Isaac, Sinai, the location of the Mosaic covenant, and Zion, the location of the Jebusite sanctuary, had all collapsed into one. For all intents and purposes the Zion was the holy mountain where Yahweh's presence, his law and his altar were to be found.

The image did not disappear when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans and the Jews were forbidden entry into the city. Religious symbols do not die with their referents. Never mind the demythologization of Jerusalem found in John 4:20-24! In Rev 21:2ff we find the vision of a new Jerusalem descending from heaven. For believers steeped in tradition, there must be a Jerusalem, it seems, if not in this world, then in the world to come!

This is how politics created the "holy city", a status which survived the kingship, the priesthood, centuries of foreign occupation and the two

millennia since the destruction of the Herodian temple. Again and again the paradigm responded to the need for legitimation of the interests of a ruling elite. Its deeply political character has again surfaced in our times: Israelis and Palestinians both lay claim to the city.

It is amazing that a modest locality with such a questionable and tempestuous history would become a 'symbol of God's eternity'. Jerusalem had become the seat of the messianic king, or the high priest, both claiming to be the representative of the heavenly King on earth. In Christian history this process repeated itself - only that the city of Rome now became the 'holy city' and the pope became the representative of Christ, the heavenly King.

The need for ideological legitimation

The adoption of royal institutions by Israel, and thus the birth of the Israelite version of the royal paradigm, was primarily a response to political needs. But politics are always underpinned by convictions. The kingship as such, the incorporation of non-Israelite ethnic groups into the Davidic empire and the choice of the Jebusite city of Jerusalem as capital, were pagan innovations which needed Israelite religious legitimation.

Israelite traditions demanded that a leader be designated by Yahweh through a prophet and that he be confirmed by the elders. While David himself had been appointed by tribal elders (2 Sam 2:4; 5:1ff), Solomon was simply appointed by David as his successor, and his enthronement was secured by David's officials: Zadok, the high priest, Nathan, the court prophet, and Benaiah, the commander of the royal militia (1 Kings 1:28ff). To secure the loyalty of the original inhabitants, David had left the Jebusite religious institutions and beliefs in Jerusalem intact. This included the continued role of Zadok, the Canaanite priest.

The legitimacy of the kingship of David was based on the authority of Israelite prophets, Samuel and Nathan. To legitimize the town as the Israelite capital, David transferred the old symbol of Yahwist faith, the ark of the covenant, to Jerusalem with great pomp and ceremony (2 Sam 6). He also transferred the son of Abiathar, an Israelite priest, to Jerusalem where he officiated alongside Zadok, the Canaanite priest. It is sobering to see that, in time, the Zadokite priesthood ousted its Israelite rival and became the dominant priesthood at the central Israelite sanctuary.

Although the Zion cannot exactly be called a mountain, the Southern tradition of a holy mountain was transferred to "Mount Zion". Jebusite religious motifs (a cosmic order guaranteed by the king in the name of the deity) were integrated into Northern tribal traditions (patriarchs, exodus, desert and conquest narratives). The Israelite idea of a covenant between Yahweh and his people was applied to the special relationship between Yahweh and David and his dynasty (2 Sam 7:12ff).

Royal-imperial ideology

However, at the heart of Israelite royal ideology lay the Ancient Near Eastern idea of a divinely established cosmic order. It embraced the celestial, the natural, the social and the moral systems. It was all one package. The king was declared to be the adopted "son of God", or the "image of God". These titles expressed the perception that the king was the representative of God on earth, thus the earthly custodian of divine ordinances and the channel of divine blessings. To disobey the king was to disobey God. And this would put the entire cosmic order at risk - including rain, fertility, political peace, economic prosperity, social justice and moral righteousness.

The concept of the king as 'son of God' presiding over the cosmic order originated in Egypt. From there it found its way to the Canaanite city states which had been part of the Egyptian empire. It was mediated into the Israelite world of thought through the Jebusite traditions in Jerusalem. Ps 110:4 actually confers the rights of the Jebusite priest-king onto David.

Psalms 2 is a classical reflection of this tradition (compare also Ps 45, 89, 110, 132 and 1 Ki 1:32ff). Let us have a brief look at this important text:

-- Typically Northern Israelite traditions (patriarchs, exodus, covenant, conquest) do not figure. The imagery is clearly taken from Israel's pagan environment. This absence of Northern motifs can be observed in the entire Jerusalemite tradition, most notably in the prophet Isaiah.

-- The authority of the king is derived from a divine decree. The Deity adopts the king as "son" and installs him over his realm of jurisdiction. The son is also "heir" of the Deity and thus the legitimate owner of the entire earth. His authority is unlimited; who conspires against the king, conspires against God.

-- God himself is perceived in terms of an Ancient Near Eastern tyrant who responds to any sign of insubordination with cynical derision and terror. He also expects his representative, the king, to do the same. Any rebellion by subordinates is not only futile but foolish, because you cannot fight against God and survive. Wise leaders are docile and obedient: they "kiss" the son and "serve him with jubilation". To force potential rebels to express love and enthusiasm is a most humiliating form of repression.

It is self-evident that this ideology was welcome to the royal court at a time when the legitimacy of Davidic rule was still shaky, when a cohesive and stable empire had to be forged out of disparate ethnic and tribal elements with their diverse traditions, interests and traditional leaders, and particularly when the burdens implied by royalty began to weigh heavily on the population as reflected in 1 Sam 8:10ff.

The notion of the particular election of Israel by Yahweh to become "a blessing to all nations" and its occupation of the land (Gen 12:1-3) fitted well into the ideological legitimation of the empire. While David and Solomon were in fact unscrupulous despots, they came to be idealized as wise, righteous and God-fearing examples of authentic leadership. The covenant between Yahweh and David was extended over his dynasty "for ever". By implication all his ascribed virtues were transferred to his successors.

We see how politics played a decisive role in the formation of the biblical concept of salvation. It is astounding that the paradigm survived the demise of Israelite and Judaic royalty, determined a thousand years of evolutionary history and remained dominant ever since. Kingship and empire have become engraved so deeply in Jewish-Christian consciousness that they formed one of the three most tenacious and versatile paradigms of salvation in the Bible. However, to be effective as such, the paradigm had to be distanced from its abuses by the incumbent kings. Let us see how that happened.

Pre-exilic critique of the paradigm

The continuing popularity of the paradigm is curious because Israel's experiences with kingship and empire were not very encouraging. A text like 1 Sam 8:10-22, though it reflects later grievances, suggests that there had been resistance to the institution from the outset. Kings were blamed for abuse of power, pompousness, unbridled desire, oppression, arbitrariness, intrigues, corruption, exploitation, military devastations and idolatry (1 Sam 27; 2 Sa 11; 1 Ki 2; 1 Ki 11). Already during the time of David various rebellions occurred (2 Sam 15-16.20). And after the death of Solomon, the Northern tribes defected in protest against the oppression of the Davidic kings (1 Ki 12).

The critique was most outspoken in the North. The sentiments expressed in 1 Sam 8:10ff were radicalized. The Jotham fable (Jdg 9:7-15) says that the king is the most useless member of the community. The book of Hosea claims that God gave Israel kings in his anger and took them away in his anger (Hos 13:11); that the sin of Israel started at Gibeah, the home town of Saul (Hos 10:9 cf Hos 9:9); that every evil began in Gilgal, where Saul was crowned king (Hos 9:15); that in times of crisis the king is useless (Hos 10:3); that judgment over Israel means destruction of the kingship (10:7,15).

Since this critique is intimately linked with the critique of the golden calf (Hos 8:4f), one has to concede that the quoted texts may be Southern pro-Davidic and pro-Zionist additions to the book, made at a time when the king had been "taken away" (Hos 13:9-11). By and large, however, Southern prophets did not question the institutions of kingship and empire as such. Texts such as Is 9:7ff; 11:1ff; Jr 22:1-5; Jr 23:5-7; Jr 33:14-17; Ez 34:23f and Zech 9:9f confirm the royal institution. But they transfer the legitimation of

royal power to the covenant law of God. The king was no longer deemed to be above the law.

Deuteronomy too contains an explicit law of the king (Dt 17:14f). While he is chosen by Yahweh, he must be "one from among their brothers". He may not "return to Egypt to multiply horses and wives" (cf the critique of Solomon in 1 Ki 11:1ff), he must study the covenant law daily (17:18f), so that he may learn to fear and obey the Lord and that "his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers" (17:20).

A prominent example of the clash between the original (Canaanite) and the reconstructed (Israelite) conceptions of the kingship is the narrative of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Ki 21. Ahab becomes depressed apparently because he is bound to Israelite common law and cannot get his way. The queen, a Canaanite princess, cannot understand: "Are you not the king in Israel?" (21:7). Her assumption is that the king has unlimited rights over his subjects and she is quick to assert these rights. The nobles find it convenient to toe the line and blindly follow her instructions. Significantly the accusation against Naboth is that "Naboth had cursed God and the king" and he is stoned to death. That is directly in line with the assumptions of Ps 2, but now it draws the wrath of God upon the offenders.

The evolution of messianism

In reaction to the failure of the incumbents, the prophets and the deuteronomic-deuteronomistic tradition developed the vision of a genuine king. He is God-fearing, just, immune to corruption, humble, economically modest, wise in judgment. He is the defender of the poor and the powerless, the oppressed and exploited, the widow and the orphan (Ps 72). He does not need to impose his will by force because his reign is based on justice and divine authority. He does not have to resort to war because Yahweh shields him (Is 9:5ff; Is 11:1-10). Some of these characteristics of a true king belong to Ancient Near Eastern royal ideology. Yet they formulate what a genuine king ought to be, in stark contrast to how the reigning king was experienced.

Yahweh's promise to the Davidic dynasty was now projected into the future: a king would soon be sent who matched Yahweh's intentions. The glowing visions of Isaiah 2:1-5, 9:1-7 or 11:1-16 set the tone. The motifs of freedom, the gathering of scattered Israelites (Mi 5:2-6), unity (Ez 37:22), justice, peace and joy all characterized the expected Messiah. Where righteousness reigned and justice prevailed, the king needed no weapons to enforce law and order. Swords would be beaten into plowshares (Is 2:4; Mi 4:3). Wolves would dwell with lambs (Is 11:6; 65:25). The holy war tradition was humanized; no nation was to be forced into submission; no ban of extinction was to be laid upon defeated enemies. Only their weapons would

be destroyed (Mi 5:2-6; Ez 34; Jr 23:5-6). The vision of an "authentic king" is also expressed by other texts, such as Ps 72:1-14 and Ps 101.

This vision was the root of the concept of the 'coming Messiah'. The Hebrew word *mashiach* means the 'anointed', thus the king. Apart from the idealizations described above, however, the parameters of the royal-imperial paradigm were not abandoned. While the coming king was so closely identified with God that he could be called "mighty God, everlasting Father" (Is 9:6), he was still a Davidic king, the king of the chosen people of Israel; he would still rule in the name of the God of Israel; he would still rule from Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, and he would rule not only over all tribes of Israel, but over the whole world. The assumption was still that peace and justice were only possible if all other nations were subjugated, not only in political, but also in religious terms.

Mi 7:8-20 reminds us of the background of such thinking: in the hour of defeat and humiliation Israel was convinced that, after Yahweh had punished her for her sins, he would reverse the situation: city walls would be rebuilt and boundaries would be extended; people would come from Assyria and Egypt to pay tribute (verse 11f); nations would be deprived of their power, lick the dust like snakes and come trembling out of their dens and turn in fear to Yahweh (verse 16f). All this remains thoroughly Judaeo-centric.

In Is 61:1ff the "anointed" is given the Spirit of Yahweh as the instrument of the salvation of the poor, brokenhearted and captive. But these are meant to be Israelites. Foreigners would do menial tasks for the Israelites, while the latter acted as priests of Yahweh and 'fed on the wealth of nations' (Is 61:5f). The former imperialists would become victims of Israelite imperialism!

This then is the vision of an eschatological kingdom which has entranced so many believers over the centuries. The underlying pattern was never abandoned. Of course, Israel never dominated the world as a whole, but the vision of God ruling through the Israelite king from his capital, Jerusalem, over the entire universe continued to fire the imagination of believers. It is found in the prophets and even in the New Testament (Is 19:23-25; Jer 4:1-2; Zech 8:13,23; Acts 3:25; Rom 4:9; Gal 3:8f,14).

It is sobering to see that the early Christian church adopted precisely this model as its foundational paradigm: Jesus was declared to be the long awaited messianic king! One could easily overlook the fact that the Christian version had assumed a radically new meaning. We shall come to that in Section III.

Section II: The impact of imperialism

Assyrian and Babylonian rule

The national catastrophes of 721 and 586 BCE were traumatic, not only for Israel as a whole, but more especially for the kingship and its ideological legitimation. Psalm 89:38-51 expresses the sordid realization that, in spite of Yahweh's assumed commitment to the Davidic king, he has, in fact, turned against him. This was no temporary setback. The royal-imperial paradigm went into its worst crisis ever. As a result of pagan conquests, the "people of God" became one of the small nations in the region which were subjugated by one imperial power after the other: the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Macedonians, and, after a short interlude, the Romans.

This fact was difficult to reconcile with Israel's claim to be the elect people of the Master of the Universe. Israel could envisage a resolution of this contradiction only in the form of a reversal of imperial roles: Yahweh would place all nations under the feet of the Israelite king. But given the political and military power relations prevalent at the time this vision had no chance to materialize. Instead the evolution of the paradigm turned into a new and unexpected direction.

With horror the Jerusalemites witnessed how a pagan emperor, acting in the name of another god, overran the city of Yahweh, destroyed the temple of Yahweh, imprisoned and humiliated Yahweh's "anointed", and took the entire upper class into Babylonian exile. The crisis of faith which these developments generated must have been cataclysmic. Either Yahweh could not redeem his people, and then his mastery was sham; or he would not redeem, and then his benevolence was sham.

But according to Jeremiah it was Yahweh, not Marduk, the god of Babylon, who led Nebuchadnezzar against Jerusalem and gave him victory (Jr 25:9; 27:6; 43:10). Yahweh lacked neither power nor benevolence; it was Israel whose sins were to blame for the calamity. The message of such prophecies was devastating. If even Yahweh, the God of Israel, had turned against his people, there was no hope left in heaven and on earth. Jeremiah was decried as a heretic and a traitor, but history was on his side.

The message of doom saved Israel's faith in a desperate situation. At least one conviction withstood the test: the God of Israel was still in command! Deutero-Isaiah gave a positive twist to this message: Cyrus, the Persian conqueror of Babylon, was Yahweh's "anointed", chosen to liberate the exiles and to restore Jerusalem as the holy city of God (Is 45:1ff). Ironically, Babylonian sources of the time had a similar message; they ascribed the victory of Cyrus to the Babylonian God Marduk, not to the Persian God, Ahuramazda. The religious legitimation of power was not confined to Israel.

According to Dt-Is, Cyrus was "called in righteousness" (Is 41:2). He was Yahweh's chosen and beloved instrument (Is 48:14). Yahweh had "called him by name" to save Israel, though he "did not acknowledge" Yahweh (Is 45:4-5). As in the case of Jeremiah's message, all this was inconceivable at the time. The prophet had to muster the argument of God's supreme sovereignty as Creator of the universe to make his message plausible - and he became quite agitated about it (Is 45).

Let us pause in reflection. We see, once again, what was expected from the ruler as a divine instrument in the Ancient Near East - whether in Jerusalem or in Babylon, whether it was David or Cyrus - namely the power to redeem! The criterion of the legitimacy of a ruler was no longer his faith in Yahweh, but his commitment to the well-being of Israel. Jeremiah's pronouncement that Nebuchadnezzar was an instrument of Yahweh's wrath now had a positive counterpart. The people could, once again, lift up their heads. But Yahweh's instruments were no longer restricted to Israelite kings.

Widening horizons

In all these texts, Israel still commanded the centre of attention. However, for the sake of Israel, one could now "seek the well-being of the city", although this city was pagan (Jr 29:7). One could enter into the services of a pagan ruler and serve Yahweh and Israel in this capacity. Figures like Joseph, Esra, Nehemiah, Esther and Daniel, who had all been in pagan employment, acquired great symbolic significance. The religious affiliation of a ruler was no longer the most fundamental consideration; decisive was his 'righteousness', his justice and his wisdom as a ruler.

This was a giant step in the direction of future political ethics. In Rm 13 the (pagan) state is God's instrument to combat evil and further the good in society. Much later Reformation theology maintained that in the political realm it was justice and reason which counted, not faith or doctrine.

The insight that Yahweh was Lord of the history of greater humanity also led to a reappraisal of Yahweh's relation to the other gods, that is, to the religious and ideological underpinnings of political power structures. In Psalm 82 Yahweh is depicted as an Ancient Near Eastern emperor; the other gods are his governors. Reminiscent of Ps 2, Yahweh had adopted them as "sons of God" and placed them in positions of authority over the nations. Yahweh finds them guilty of serious miscarriages of justice, especially of favoritism at the expense of the poor and powerless. As a consequence, they are demoted and executed "like any human tyrant". Empire all over again! The point is, however, that the other gods are not demoted for religious reasons, but simply because they are not seen to act in accordance with Yahweh's principles of justice.

All human beings are kings, not slaves

The exile also led to another ground-breaking insight. The Priestly creation story applied the royal title "image of God" to the first two human beings, thus to all human beings - and, in contrast to the older creation story in Gn 2, emphatically to male and female alike (Gn 1:26ff; cf Ps 8:3ff).

We remember that this was not the time of David when Israelites oppressed pagans! It was the time when the Jews were at the receiving end of pagan oppression. In a situation of intense social and spiritual suffering, Jewish theology came up with the emphatic statement that every human being is a king or queen, that is, a representative of God on earth, equal in dignity with all others and meant to rule over the rest of creation!

The designation of humanity as royalty reads like a protest against the Babylonian myth of creation (the *Enuma elish*) which the Jews had encountered while in exile. Here humans are deemed to have been created by Marduk, the god of Babylon, out of the blood of a rebellious god with the express purpose of serving the gods as slaves, so that these gods would not again rise up in rebellion. The implication is that humans are meant to be slaves, but they have rebellion in their blood, and need to be subdued. The ideological motive of the myth, namely to legitimate Babylonian oppression, is transparent enough.

It is to their credit that these Jewish theologians did not restrict the dignity of the "image of God" to Jews, or to males, but applied it to all human beings. Much later, Paul formulated his own version of this insight. Christ is the image of God (2 Cor 4:4), into whose image we are to be transformed (2 Cor 3:18). Or using the other royal title, "Son of God": in Christ, that is in the new humanity, we are no longer slaves but "sons (and daughters) of God" (Gal 3:23-28, cf Rm 8:13-17), that is, bearers of the ancient royal dignity, and "heirs" like the ancient kings (Ps 2:8), whether we are Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, female or male. The presupposition is that we participate in the new life of Christ, who is the "image of God", or the "Son of God", or the "mediator of creation".

But the insight did not last. Judaism did not find a way out of patriarchal domination, nor did Paul. The motif of the image of God found in Gen 1 was not taken up again in any of the canonical books of the Old Testament. Paul too soon reaffirmed patriarchal dominance. Alas, the Priestly Source also did not overcome the violent approach found in Psalm 2 as far as human attitudes towards nature are concerned. Whereas the female is elevated to the same status as the male, the rest of creation is not. On the contrary, humans are called upon to subdue the earth and rule over the other creatures.

After the flood this mandate becomes even more explicit: all other creatures are given into the hands of the human being to terrorize and utilize at will (Gn 9:1-3). It is Ps 2 all over again! In the 21st century the

consequences of this ruthlessness have become so devastating that they have begun to endanger human survival. It is high time that we do our homework!

Leaders suffer for the sins of others

Another result of the exile, the time of deepest Jewish humiliation, was the emergence of the remarkable figure of the "Suffering Servant". This figure was not linked to the king, but it had a profound impact on the New Testament understanding of the messianic king. The Servant Songs of Deutero-Isaiah debunk the deuteronomic contention that suffering is necessarily the punishment of Yahweh for the sins of those who suffer. It can also be the sins of others, they maintain, which are laid upon the shoulders of the righteous servants of God.

The identity of the "Servant" referred to by the author is uncertain. To me it seems likely that he was meant to be the God-fearing elite in Jerusalem which had been taken into Babylonian exile. In their view, they had listened to God; they had strengthened the weary; they had not been rebellious; they had not hidden their faces from insults; they had been blameless and would not be put to shame (Is 50:4-9). It was the consequences of the sins of other Israelites which had been placed on their shoulders; they had borne their fate with dignity, and as a result they would have a glorious future (Is 53:4-11).

The motif has no precedent in earlier traditions and it played virtually no role in later writings of the Old Testament. But it is humiliating for Christians to see what Jews had to suffer for a paradigm to emerge which became fundamental to the Christian understanding of salvation half a millennium later.

The impact of Persian rule

The Persians allowed the establishment of small *religious dependencies* in Palestine. Jerusalem and the temple were rebuilt. A religious order was established under the authority of the high priest. Of course, this authority was accountable to the Persian authorities and had no military teeth of its own. As can be expected, the kingship was not emphasized during this period. In the context of Persian rule, royal traditions were potentially subversive. For their part, the high priests would hardly propagate an ideology which could undermine their own embattled authority.

So the emphasis fell on Moses, rather than David. He had been the representative of Yahweh over against his people. His memory was not burdened with the failure of the kings. With him the priesthood could readily identify. His role as mediator of the covenant and the torah was emphasized, rather than his leadership in the exodus. The significance of the exodus was reduced to a symbol of Israel's identity as the elect people of God.

Similarly, not the kingdom, but the desert experiences were highlighted as the symbol of Israel's existence. In the desert stories, the people murmur against God and 'Moses' (= the priesthood) has to intercede to avert Yahweh's punishment. All this fitted the miserable situation during the period of the restoration well. Only much later did revolutionary tendencies begin to surface again.

Not only priests but also prophets seem to have been wary of the royal paradigm during this time. In Is 65:17ff, for instance, the Zionist peace tradition of Is 2:2-5 is revived without the messianic connotations of Is 9 and 11. The expectation of a new heaven and a new earth focuses on the restoration of Jerusalem.

However, the Ancient Near Eastern concepts of a cosmic order and the king as the channel of divine power and authority did not disappear under these circumstances. They were only reinterpreted. The role of the human king as a link between the heavenly and the earthly realm was temporarily suspended. According to Psalm 146 it is hazardous to trust princes who are mortals and cannot redeem. Yahweh is the true king, the only true giver of life and health, liberation and justice, salvation and consolation. Recent history had surely demonstrated that one could not depend on human kings.

But all the time Jerusalem was a theocracy; and theocracies happen to be administered by priests. Thus in actual fact priests had assumed the role of the kings as mediators of God's presence. Indeed, as time went by, these priests again assumed royal attributes. In Sir 45:8ff Aaron appears in royal garb. Priestly dynasties emerged and these developed into the Hasmonaic and Herodian royal dynasties - much to the indignation of some of the stricter believers (cf Psalms of Solomon 17:4ff). Later the Rabbinic leadership showed similar tendencies.

Inevitably all this led to new disillusionment. But in spite of recurring failures, the royal-imperial paradigm was not abandoned. Messianic hopes remained alive in the population - the more so the more contemporary leaders failed to live up to the standards of the messianic vision. The reason for this phenomenon seems to be a deep spiritual need. It was difficult to believe in an invisible God. It was much easier to focus one's loyalty on a human being who was supposed to be the "image of God", the carrier of divine power, blessing and justice.

The impact of Hellenistic rule

With Alexander, Hellenization broke into the theocratic system. Politically the Hellenistic empire was highly centralized; the country was considered to be the king's personal estate. In practice, however, cities and dependent territories were placed under indirect rule. This allowed the Jewish priestly aristocracy in Jerusalem a measure of autonomy. However, the attractions of

a more advanced culture and the necessities of pandering to the superiors posed a severe threat to Jewish identity. Radical reactions were the result. The success of Hellenization and the desecration of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes once again questioned the plausibility of deuteronomistic theology which was built on reward and punishment. Where was the God of Israel, if all that could happen and go unpunished?

The theocracy in Jerusalem itself was compromised and could no longer be seen as a manifestation of God's sovereignty and the righteousness of the people of God. Evil and salvation had to be seen in greater contexts. It was the Apocalyptic movement that provided new answers. It formed the dynamic counterpart to the static theocratic model in Jerusalem. Its roots go back to the prophetic movement, but the Parsist theology of history, encountered by the Jews during Persian rule, may have played a catalytic role.

According to the visions of Daniel 7 a series of bestial empires follow each other until a "Son of Man" (a humane ruler) is sent from heaven to rule over the universe. He is seen as a representative, not only of Yahweh but also of his people. In verses 13ff the Son of Man is portrayed as an individual, while in verses 27ff he is identified with the "saints, the people of the Most High." Of course, the royal-imperial paradigm always makes provision for a privileged elite, in this case the Israelites.

In a sense, eschatology can be seen as a subtle form of the revolutionary spirit. But it also hopes for more than history can yield. Revolutionaries are more practical. They want to achieve whatever can be achieved on this earth. For this reason they are also more fanatic. Judas the Galilean provided a radically theocratic and military version of the political paradigm: God alone is king; therefore nobody else may be obeyed; therefore the people of God had the duty to liberate themselves from foreign oppression. God was the God of battles who would overthrow and destroy the enemies of his people.

Under the political circumstances of the time, revolutionary messianism had no chance of success. This fact led to spiritualization and eschatology. The 'War Rule' of Qumran manifests a peculiar spiritualization of the radical spirit, akin to Parsism and Apocalyptic. Here the rule of Satan is pitted against the dominion of God. To prepare itself for the eschatological showdown, the community of saints withdraws into the desert and struggles against Satan by means of discipline and asceticism.

An intermediate position was taken by the Pharisees who believed in the possibility of keeping the law in daily life under the conditions of foreign rule. The concern of both the Essenes and the Pharisees was the preservation of a sacred group which upheld the moral excellence, ritual purity and privileged access to God deemed to be characteristic of the elect, until the time of the final reckoning would come.

Wisdom presented the most radical alternative to the revolutionary spirit. Kohelet 8:2-8 shows how a "wise" sort of resignation could take hold of people subjected to invincible oppressors for long periods of time. Under such circumstances only *eschatological* messianism was able to transcend a seemingly stagnant situation. This is what made the New Testament tick.

All these approaches can be seen as faith responses to the situation of anomie created by cultural alienation, political domination and the potential disintegration of Jewish identity. They clearly indicate how reactions to political power arrangements determined the evolution of Jewish concepts of salvation in general and the royal paradigm in particular in various directions through vast stretches of its history.

Section III: The New Testament

The origins of Christian messianism

According to the Synoptic Gospels Jesus was first seen as an itinerant religious teacher or *rabbi*. The vitality of his preaching, his authoritative reinterpretation of the law, his compassion with the guilty, the outcast and the sick - expressed in some spectacular deeds of solidarity and healing - raised messianic expectations attached to his person. They culminated in the unarmed but triumphant procession with which he and his Galilean followers moved from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem, followed by the dramatic cleansing of the temple (Mt 21:1-17 par).

These were highly provocative messianic acts which corresponded with the ancient "prince of peace" tradition (Is 11; Zech 9:9ff). Accordingly they caused an uproar in the population of the city (Mt 21:10). Who was this unknown teacher from a remote province to do such things! It is important to distinguish between the Galilean pilgrims who shouted "Hosanna!" during the procession into Jerusalem, and the citizens of Jerusalem who shouted "Crucify!" when Jesus was presented to the Roman Governor.

The Synhedrion, a Jewish representative council, had ruled the province under the chairmanship of a high priest since a ruthless Herodian, Archelaus, had been deposed by the Romans. The Synhedrion was accountable for its actions to the Roman governor. It was highly alarmed by the actions of Jesus. Both his reinterpretation of the law and his messianic behavior were capable of undermining its authority and posed the danger of Roman intervention.

Surrounded by his followers, Jesus was able to teach for some time in the temple, but at night he had to seek the safety of a secret place outside the city. When he was betrayed by one of his followers and arrested, the messianic hopes attached to his person collapsed. His followers fled in panic. The Roman governor, seemingly after much hesitation, commanded him to be

crucified for insurrection upon the insistence of the Synhedrion. The inscription on the cross, "The king of the Jews", is the most reliable historical evidence of the fact that it was the supposed kingship of Jesus that was at stake in the court case, even if Pilate used this title both to placate and humiliate the Jewish leaders.

The crisis of the crucifixion

It is hard to imagine the disillusionment which must have possessed the disciples of Jesus in the wake of the crucifixion. How could a leader with such integrity, commitment and love end on the gallows - and the heavens were not stirred? Did he really misrepresent God's intentions so seriously that God's wrath had to crush his body, his honor and his conviction? And what was to become of those who had followed him in good faith? The transcendent dimension of human needs again came into full play.

Without doubt the Servant Song found in Is 52:13-53:12 enabled his followers to interpret this devastating catastrophe as a redemptive act of God. As mentioned above, this song refuted the contention of deuteronomic orthodoxy that those who suffer, suffer for their own sin. A servant of God can very well suffer because of the sins of others. This again was understood in terms of the sacrificial motif: the transgressions of the people were laid upon the lamb which was sacrificed.

All this began to make sense of the catastrophe: Jesus - crowned with thorns, mocked and flogged by soldiers, abandoned by his followers, executed for high treason, forsaken by God - was in fact God's Servant who bore the sins of many, who would be highly exalted, whose days would be prolonged, who would see a large offspring. The pillars of Jewish orthodoxy, in contrast, were expecting the ruler of the universe to come in glory to judge the living and the dead according to the Mosaic law. They could only turn away in indignation and try to suppress this dangerously growing sect with its subversive ideas. The scandal of the cross had been born.

A new kind of Messiah

Let us reflect a moment on what has happened here! Without the agony caused to the followers of Jesus by the execution of the person whom they had believed to be the Messiah, the basic Christian concept of salvation would not have emerged. A new constellation of need had challenged the Jewish tradition and forced it into a new mould.

Once the followers of Jesus could discern some purpose in the crucifixion, the identification of Jesus with the coming Messiah flared up once again. The Book of Revelation is the most baroque presentation of Christian Apocalyptic we have, but that came much later. In a more subdued mood, traditional

messianic titles were applied to Jesus. Paul prefers 'Christ' and 'Lord' (*kurios*). The Synoptics prefer 'the Son of Man'. Other messianic titles applied to Jesus were the Son of God, Son of David, and King. John is most prolific in his metaphors: Logos, Son, light, (eternal) life, truth, Spirit, living water, bread of life, shepherd, vine, etc.

It is significant that it is only very occasionally that Jesus was ascribed the status of a "prophet" (in the Synoptics as a misconception of the people; Mat 14:5; 16:14; 21:11, 46 par, Lk 7:16,39; 24:19; exception Lk 13:33), and a "high priest" (in Hebrews to dismantle the idea of the priesthood). It is also significant that it is the image of the Davidic king, not its old rival, the figure of Moses (who stood for the Jewish law), which was applied to Jesus. Jesus was proclaimed to be the expected king of the universe - plain and simple!

It is also significant in terms of our need-response hypothesis that New Testament authors were very hesitant in the use of overtly political titles for Jesus, such as the "Son of David" and the "King of Israel". In view of the fact that Jesus was perceived to be the messianic king, rather than a prophet or priest, this may seem paradoxical. But seemingly it was just too dangerous. The memory of the title "King of the Jews", nailed to the cross by Pilate, was vivid enough to show that political titles could lead into trouble. Jesus was not to be misunderstood as a common revolutionary, but as the eschatological "prince of peace" promised by the prophets. His role was increasingly spiritualized so as not to raise political eye brows.

However, much more important was the ground-breaking theological insight that God did not condone authoritarian, violent and oppressive rule - whether by dictators or revolutionary leaders. The narrative of the temptation of Jesus describes world domination as a seduction of the devil (Mt 4:8ff par). The Messiah would use different means to reign over the world!

The most remarkable text in this regard is found in Mk 10:35-45 (par). Here Jesus rejects the model of Psalm 2 as pagan and forbids his disciples to foster any ambitions of domination. Whoever wants to lead should serve like a slave, just as Jesus himself, the Lord, is a servant who lives and dies for his subordinates. Paul applies this new vision to his own leadership (2 Cor 1:24) and also to communal (Phil 2:1-11), and even to economic relationships (1 Cor 3:5ff, 21ff; 2 Cor 8:9).

A remarkable undercurrent of meaning had reached its goal. By and large, the community of believers has still not worked through its implications even today. The original ideal of absolute power, inherited by the Israelite kings from ancient Egypt via the Canaanite city state, had been turned on its head! At the end of the trajectory, a Galilean preacher, who was condemned by the leaders of his people, abandoned by his followers, ridiculed by the mob and executed by the imperial authorities of the time, was proclaimed to be the ruler of the universe. This type of message takes considerable folly to

proclaim - or considerable courage! Indeed early Christians were willing to suffer persecution and martyrdom for their conviction.

The crisis of the delay of the second coming

After the abrupt crisis of the crucifixion a more gradual crisis of faith set in. It was due to the fact that the expected arrival of Christ in glory (the *parousia*) did not materialise. New Testament authors tried to explain the delay in various ways: God was patient; the gospel first had to be preached to the whole world; one day in God's time was more than a thousand years, and so on. But it was all of no avail. Persecutions made faith in Christ costly. Would long term disillusionment finally crush the messianic faith?

Again a new constellation of needs challenged the existing tradition and forced it to adapt. This can be demonstrated most clearly in the Pauline corpus. Paul's earliest letter still reflects the apocalyptic expectation (1 Thess 4:13ff). In Apocalyptic the authority and power of the Messiah belong to the eschatological future. The resurrection of Christ did not lead to his universal rule, at least not before this date, but gave him the authority to subdue the enemies of the new age. This is clearly reflected in 1 Cor 15:24ff. Moreover, Christ's rule is here seen as an interregnum designed to bring to boot all enemies before God himself takes over full control.

In contrast, Eph 1:20ff, written by one of Paul's disciples, proclaims the enthronement of the risen Christ as universal Lord - far above all powers which govern the universe - not as a future prospect, but as a given fact. What ought to be has shifted from an eschatological future to a heavenly realm. This shift from temporal to spatial terms reflects the interest of Hellenism in eternal and universal validity. Eph 4:8ff depicts Christ as having descended to the lowest, and ascended above the highest places "in order to fill the whole universe".

In Col 1:15, also a product of the Pauline school, the emphasis is shifted from the end of times to the beginning of times (cf Heb 1:2, Jn 1:1ff). While the idea of "the ultimate end of times" expresses hope for the future, the idea of "the beginning of times" signifies validity for all times. Christ's Lordship is entrenched in the very foundations of reality. Similarly the believers are already with Christ in his glory and this status only needs to be revealed (Eph 2:6; Col 3:1ff).

To see how the Deutero-Pauline school applied the royal-imperial paradigm to Christ, let us compare Eph 1:20-23 with Ps 82, as quoted above:

-- Just as Yahweh is depicted as Lord over all gods in Psalm 82, so Christ is here depicted as having been enthroned "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the age to come."

-- Just as Israel, the chosen people of Yahweh, was directly subject to the divine emperor, the believers in Christ (his "Body") are subject to Christ as their Head. One has to distinguish, therefore, between Yahweh's rule over the world and his rule over Israel; similarly one has to distinguish between the authority of Christ over the universe and his headship over the church, the 'Body of Christ'.

-- Just as in the Old Testament Israel was to be the witness of Yahweh among the nations, so the particular task of the church as the 'Body of Christ' is to be a witness to Christ's universal lordship in the world. Note that Psalm 82 does not speak about people, but about other gods. Similarly, Eph says that the church should witness to the principalities and powers who rule the world (Eph 3:10). Today we would speak of the prophetic mission of the church to the social power structures and their ideological legitimations.

-- The criterion of legitimacy in Ps 82 is the execution of justice. The criterion of legitimacy in Eph is the redeeming love of Christ which found its most profound expression in the cross. The cross is mentioned again and again in Eph. Power belongs to the Crucified. From now on authority over others can only be legitimate if it consists of self-less service rendered to others.

The existentialist version

The vision of the Deutero-Pauline letters (Eph and Col) has universal dimensions. But for simple congregation members the concept of cosmic power structures was not all that relevant. The Jesus-experience had, after all, begun as an intimate personal relationship between leader and follower. Ordinary believers wanted to continue with that. They clung to the stories of what Jesus had said and done during his life on earth.

In the Synoptic Gospels faith is seen as following a leader through life into death, who would then lead his followers through death into life. What ultimately counted in this discipleship was nothing but sharing in the mercy of God as manifest in Christ (Mt 25:31-46). As both Mt 25:31ff and 28:16ff show, however, even personal dedication needed the assurance that it was the ultimate Lord, Judge and Redeemer of the universe who was being followed.

John's Gospel too begins with cosmic dimensions. Jesus is the instrument of creation, the source of life and the light which enlightens every human being (1:3f, 9). But then the Gospel focuses on the existential decision of the believer. For John's Gospel neither the past, nor the future, nor the heavenly places, nor social power structures are of any importance. Christ is the king of authentic humanity. He has come into human reality to witness to the truth. As the Son of God, he represents his divine Father. In fact, we meet the Father in him.

As representative of God, Christ is the new human being, who lives in fellowship with God (5:19f) and who is present in the Spirit (14:16-18). Our response to this encounter with God in Christ through the Spirit determines our eternal fate. Whoever accepts Christ now, has already entered eternal life and will not face judgment; whoever rejects Christ now, is already judged (3:18f; 5:24). Correspondingly, the kingdom of Christ is "not of this world" (18:36f), because it is the kingdom of authentic human existence. And the material content of authentic human existence is, again, nothing but humble service (Jn 13:1-17).

This does not mean that John argues in terms of a Platonic ideal which hovers above concrete reality. His usage of the concept "eternal life" can easily lead to this misunderstanding. Rather, the Son has "come into the world"; the Logos has "become flesh". Spiritualization is harshly rejected in all Johannine writings. 1 John 1:1 says that the apostles had heard the word of life with their ears, seen it with their eyes, touched it with their hands. Eternal life means authentic life, not an abstract life somewhere beyond time, space and power relations.

Why was the royal-imperial paradigm not abandoned?

The royal-imperial paradigm with its universal claims was transformed but not abandoned by the New Testament. Paradoxically Psalm 2 and Psalm 110 are applied to Jesus Christ more often than many other potentially relevant Old Testament texts. Jesus is still enthroned at the "right hand of God" as the "Son of God" or the "image of God". In fact, the claim to authority of God's representatives on earth, as found in Ps 2, was radicalized by the New Testament. As the instrument of creation, Christ represents the Creator's original intentions; as the new creation he defines the goal of history; as the ultimate Judge he defines the criteria of authentic existence.

That seems odd. Is a king not an authoritarian ruler by definition? Why was the royal-imperial paradigm not replaced with something more appropriate? The answer is that the New Testament laid claim to this tradition precisely to transform its meaning from within. On the one hand it affirmed the fact that the invisible God acts through human representatives on earth. That is what kingship meant in the Ancient Near East. On the other hand it asserted the universal validity of Christ's new approach to authority. It is precisely to the crucified "Servant", reminiscent of Is 53, that God entrusts all power in heaven and on earth (Mt 28:18; 1 Cor 1:22f). Not oppressive rule, but dedicated service characterizes the representative of God on earth. This point cannot be overemphasized!

Moreover, the New Testament claims that the followers of Christ, who are willing to serve and suffer, share in his authority, love and vision. They are enthroned with him "in the heavenly places" (Eph 2:6); they will sit on

thrones judging the "twelve tribes of Israel" (Luk 22:28-30); in fact, they will judge the world (1 Cor 6:2). The root of this conception is already found in Judaism: Adam, the essential human being, was meant to rule over nature (Gen 1:28ff); the "Son of Man" of Dan 7 also refers to a group, not just to an individual (7:27). We have seen that the same could be true of the "Servant of the Lord" in Is 53.

Similarly, Paul speaks of 'the Christ', or the 'Body of Christ', as the community of those in whom the Spirit of Christ manifests itself (1 Cor 12:12f). So the authority of Christ is a highly participatory sort of authority. A revealing text in this regard is Rev 3:21: "To the one who conquers, I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself have conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne." In Christ, God shares his royal prerogative not only with a single ruler, but with every person who participates in the new life of Christ. All authoritarianism has been overcome.

The Lordship of Christ was indeed perceived as encompassing all possible times, present, past and future (Rev 1:17f), all possible spaces, the lowest and the highest (Eph 4:9f), and all possible authorities which govern this universe (Eph 1:20ff). It was projected to the beginning and the end of times, to the heights and the depths of cosmic space, to the extremes of human powerlessness and divine omnipotence. Yet, at heart the Lordship of Christ always meant personal and practical commitment to his self-giving, redeeming love in daily life.

In sum, the crisis due to the delay in the return of Christ forced the early church to reflect deeper on the significance of the Christ-event in terms of time, space and power. This reflection moved from individual discipleship to universal dimensions and back to individual discipleship.

Section IV: Lessons for today

The relevance of the paradigm is there for all to see. Imperial ideology emerged as a soteriological model wherever empires were built. Think of the *pax Romana*, the Spanish *conquistadores*, the British imperialists and their Russian counterparts! In Marxism we have a messianic *avant garde* driven by the historical dialectic. Hitler believed that he was ordained by fate to forge "Heil" (= well-being) for the Germanic race by enslaving the rest of humanity. According to apartheid ideology, whites had to retain power to uphold Christian civilization at the Southern tip of Africa. In Swaziland the monarchy wields absolute power in the name of Swazi cultural identity.

What can be learnt from the trajectory of the paradigm in biblical history? First, it shows once again that the biblical faith was not based on an "eternal truth" which fell ready-made from heaven, as it were. Rather, ever new

insights dawned when believers suffered and struggled with God for answers to their problems.

Second, we saw that the biblical faith was confronted with political challenges from its very inception and did not try to escape this challenge. The horizons widened constantly in the process, beginning with the small world of a nomadic clan, and ending with the Apocalyptic visions of a cosmic reconstruction. In this comprehensive vision, there is no difference between church and state; every institution is supposed to follow the same rules.

Third, and most important, the material contents of the tradition has changed from an ideology of royal absolutism, into its complete opposite, the accountability of the ruler to the ruled. The statement attributed to Jesus, that only a slave of the people has the right to rule over the people, is the most revolutionary thought ever to have been uttered by a religious leader in the political realm. A slave does not give orders; a slave receives orders.

Jesus certainly did not promulgate self-enslavement or enslavement by others. He called for sovereign, voluntary, self-giving service. But this cannot simply remain an attitude. In the meantime we know, or should know, that it is not sufficient if rulers claim to be the servants of their people. In fact, this claim is typical for dictators. It is also not sufficient for subjects to demand that political leaders practice what they preach, because nobody can force them to do that if they have dictatorial powers!

So to be effective, the principle expressed by Jesus must be entrenched in the constitution of a state. There is only one form of the state where rulers receive their mandate from their subordinates and where this mandate can be withdrawn, and that is the democratic state. In this state authority moves primarily from the bottom upward and only secondarily from the top downward. Democracy is, therefore, not only legitimate in terms of the Christian faith, it is the only form of government that is legitimate!

And if that is true for the secular state, it should be true even more so for the authority structures of the church of Christ. It is fallacious to assume that Christ, the Lord of the church, can only exercise his Lordship through a dictatorial office, rather than through the combined insights of the fellowship of believers. Quoting Old Testament prophecies, the New Testament claims that the Spirit of God is no longer given to gifted individuals, as in the early phases of biblical history, but to the community of believers as a whole. Whoever exerts authority in the church, can only do so in their name, to their benefit, with their mandate and subject to their consent.

We have to concede that the Bible knows nothing of the democratic form of authority. Neither the system of clan heads and tribal elders, nor the leadership pattern in Pauline congregations can be called democratic in the modern sense of the word. As we have seen in chapter 8, the Old Testament law is far removed from modern ideals of emancipation and human rights.

New Testament authors did not attack slavery and most of them affirmed patriarchal authority. But all this only indicates that the trajectory we have sketched, while indicating the direction, had not reached its peak by the time the Canon was closed. This came only later - much, much later! And to many, even in the church, it has not come at all as yet.

Summary

The trajectory of the royal-imperial paradigm in biblical history displays a remarkable transformation of attitudes towards authority. Beginning with the legitimation of ruthless dictatorship, it ends with the demand that those who exercise authority serve their subordinates like slaves. Because rulers are human beings, this principle can only be safeguarded by a democratic system.

The universal horizons of the image of a representative of God on earth, however, are not abandoned, but absolutised in the trajectory. Projected to the ultimates of time, space and power, the crucified Christ becomes the only valid representative of God within reality. In general, Christians have not fully appropriated this insight, nor have they understood its implications for the administration of the church of Christ.

Questions

1. Revision: In which ways has the image of the king changed from the times of David to the times of the early Christian church, and in which ways has it not changed?
2. Application: If to rule means to serve, what implications does this have for (a) the upbringing of children, (b) doctors and patients, (c) lecturers and students, (d) human mastery over other creatures and the natural world as a whole?
3. Critique: (a) "Your plea for democracy is idolatrous. We have no 'human rights' before God; Christ is Lord; his will is final; any insubordination will not be tolerated in the kingdom of God!" (b) "Secular society has long established the principles of democracy and human rights, mostly against the resistance of the church. Even in modern times, most churches are run according to authoritarian principles. We really do not need the contribution of the Bible in this realm of life!" How would you respond to these statements?