

Fit for the Reign of God

ISRAEL'S COVENANT with God stipulated that no other powers, divine or human, would rule the people's lives. Yet the biblical story repeatedly tells of the nation's turn away from God's rule to other gods or to the misguided political judgments of the kings and rulers who did not heed God's true prophets. True prophets often found themselves at odds with Israel's leaders. God's word opposed human social, religious and political compromises. By New Testament times the tension between prophecy and politics was expressed in the opposition between pragmatists like the Sadducees and Pharisees, who sought to adapt national life to the inevitable powers of the world, and visionaries like the Essene monks at Qumran or John the Baptist who anticipated the emergence of a new age of holiness after God judged this evil age. The question of what is required of a people that will be "fit for the reign of God" can receive very different answers in pragmatist and visionary contexts.

The tension between pragmatic adaptation and visionary reformation lies at the heart of biblical religion. Attempts to resolve the dilemma by identifying with one pole or the other inevitably miss the point. On the one hand, God's rule is exercised in the historical lives of communities of believers. Divine reality is not confined to myths about primordial times or an anticipated heaven. Pragmatic adaptation of the tradition seeks to make sure that God's rule over human life is still relevant. On the other hand, human beings are inherently unable to shape their lives and societies according to religious and philosophical visions of what is just and good. Visionary reformation reminds us of the radical and structural nature of evil. It rejects the claim that problems can be cured with a little human adjustment of the economy, society or religion. It keeps alive the sense that we can only be set right again by God's vision.

In the ninth century Elijah denounced the widespread influence of the Baal cult and its prophets. Baal was a storm god worshiped by the Phoenicians and by Israelite peasants who sought to insure

the fertility of the land. Eighth century prophets like Hosea continued the struggles against the Baal cult. Initially, Tyrian Baal was introduced to Israel by the royal dynasty, when Ahab married the Tyrian princess Jezebel. The cult spread from the royal center in Samaria to the provincial towns. Political pragmatism may have led the king to make an alliance with the Phoenicians. The result of this alliance was widespread idolatry.

The stories of Elijah emphasize the persecution the prophet suffered for his challenge to this royal innovation. The covenant with God is maintained only by those who have not worshiped Baal (I Kings 19:14-18). God's rule is manifest only in the prophet who survives despite the attempts against his life. The prophet passes on the task of the divine anointing

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of Israel's king as well as his own vocation as prophet. Yet the transfer of prophetic mission to Elisha suggests that the tension between the prophet and society will remain: Elisha must abandon his life as an ordinary member of society, bid farewell to his mother and father, and sacrifice the oxen with which he had made his living (I Kings 19:19-21).

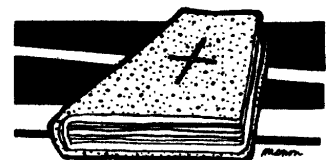
Jesus' radical discipleship sayings in Luke 9:57-62 reflect this tradition. The urgency of Jesus' message about God's approaching rule becomes evident when the last saying is contrasted with the Elijah-Elisha story. Elisha was permitted to say goodbye to his parents. Jesus' disciples were not. Anyone who looks back is not "fit for the rule of God." Jesus' disciples cannot even expect the security of the lair or nest that an animal would have, Luke adds. Nor can his disciples be distracted by such urgent filial obligations as burying a parent. The words, "Let the dead bury their dead,"

seem to imply that the spiritually dead, those who have not heard the call to discipleship, can bury the physically dead. Neither I Kings nor Luke assumes that most people will offer the radical devotion to God's word required of the prophet or of Jesus and his disciples.

What is the significance of the stories and sayings in I Kings and Luke? The persecuted prophet and the homeless disciples question our presumption that our way of life has divine support. Homes, work, filial respect and affection are not denounced as evils, but they can become such dominant preoccupations that they make people unfit for the rule of God. Our private and public choices may become dominated by the desire to preserve a way of life, a pattern of social relationships and even religious rites that we find comfortable. We may be unwilling to change or challenge those securities even when the word of God invites us to do so. We do not want low- or moderate-income housing in our town, ethnic diversity in our schools or new expressions of worship in our churches.

St. Paul expresses the conflict in terms of the individual person. Christians know that they are to live as servants of others. They know that the law is fulfilled by loving their neighbor. But their lives often remain dominated by "desires of the flesh." We may think that more laws are the only way to deal with the social needs that are blocked by our "fleshly desire" to keep things as they are. The state can tell towns that they must have certain types of housing, but as St. Paul recognizes, from a Christian perspective true reformation is not accomplished by law. Law cannot create the fruits of the Spirit, which come from following Christ (Gal. 5:1, 13-25). Every Christian struggles with the tensions of pragmatism and vision. But there is no one-time solution to the dilemma, only a discipleship of those seeking to walk in the Spirit.

PHEME PERKINS





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