

Reading the Bible after Christendom

Sample Chapter

Jesus as the Centre of Biblical Interpretation

INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter highlighted the Christocentrism of Anabaptist hermeneutics. It is, of course, commonplace to state that Christian biblical interpretation begins and ends with Jesus. However, there is no overall agreement as to what this actually means in practice. This was also true for the Anabaptists themselves. For some it means mining the Old Testament for messianic proof texts. Others employ allegorical techniques to read Jesus back into Old Testament texts.

The predominant contemporary approach, however, is both to read the Old Testament in the ‘light of its climax in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ’ and to understand ‘the climax of the drama, God’s revelation in Christ, in light of the long history of God’s self-revelation to Israel.’ This approach employs figural or typological readings of the Old Testament and sees Jesus as both recapitulating and fulfilling Israel’s history.

Whilst there are merits in all these approaches, I want to suggest alternative ways in which Jesus is central to biblical interpretation.

First, Jesus exemplifies what the Old Testament means by loving God ‘with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’ (Deut 6:5) and loving ‘your neighbour as yourself’ (Lev 19:18), which he states are at the heart of the Old Testament (Matt 22:40). Second, Jesus expands on this by speaking of ‘justice and mercy and faith’ as the ‘weightier matters of the law’ (Matt 23:23). So, any reading of scripture which claims to be Christocentric should enhance our love of God and neighbour and contribute to human flourishing in terms of justice, mercy and faithfulness. This brings ethics and praxis to the forefront of biblical interpretation. Finally, reflection on the person of Jesus can provide us with particular lenses with which to read the bible.

It has been customary in systematic theology to speak of the offices of Christ: namely Christ as prophet, priest and king. Although these are thoroughly biblical images, it is arguable that Christ’s role as priest and king has been too often viewed through the lens of Christendom. Christ’s priestly role can too easily reinforce clerical readings that perpetuate the clergy-laity divide and Christ’s kingly role can too easily reinforce images of power and authority that render the poor and marginalised mute. I shall, therefore, propose using images of Jesus as prophet, pastor and poet as angles of vision with which to read the biblical texts. These images are not exhaustive but by using several in this way I hope to demonstrate that there is no monolithic way to interpret scripture – our interpretations are inevitably plural and should be celebrated as such. Prophetic, pastoral and poetic angles of vision correspond to specific biblical genres (prophecy, epistle and wisdom literature) but also provide perspectives with which to view the bible as a whole.

JESUS AS PROPHET

Deut 18:15-19 speaks of a prophet like Moses being raised up and this text is specifically applied to Jesus in Acts 3:22-23. Matthew, as we shall see later, structures his gospel specifically so that Jesus should be seen as the New Moses. Furthermore, the gospels regularly categorise Jesus as a prophet (Matt 13:57; 21:11, 46; Mark 6:14-16; 8:28; 14:65; Luke 7:16, 39-50; 13:33; 24:19; John 4:19; 6:14; 7:40, 52; 9:17). As Tom Wright demonstrates, Jesus displays characteristics of a number of

Old Testament prophets: Micaiah ben Imlach (1 Kings 22), Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Jonah, Amos and, above all, Elijah. Jesus as prophet was mighty in word and deed, pronounced oracles of judgment and proclaimed the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. His message involved an invitation to repent and believe, it was a welcome to sinners with its offer of forgiveness, a challenge to live subsequently as befits the people of God and a summons to take up the cross. I will say more on all this later. Jesus' message of the kingdom of God inspired an alternative consciousness to that of the dominant culture as well as profoundly critiquing that culture. As a prophet, therefore, Jesus was engaged in prophetic consciousness raising, prophetic energising and prophetic criticising.

PROPHETIC CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

First century Judaism was by no means monolithic, as is now a commonplace in biblical scholarship. Judaism in Palestine responded in different ways to the reality of Roman occupation. As Josephus records, there were four main options: Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes and 'the Fourth Philosophy.' The priestly leadership in Judaea was drawn predominantly from the aristocratic Sadducees, many of whom were notoriously pro-Roman. They had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. The Pharisees were particularly interested in maintaining purity and this brought them into regular conflict with the Jesus movement as recorded in the Gospels. Their concern for purity led to mixed responses to Roman occupation. Some engaged in clear opposition to the Romans and undoubtedly were attracted to revolutionary movements whilst others broadly accommodated themselves to Roman rule focusing on purity within the community as the means of achieving liberation. For both Sadducees and Pharisees, however, the Temple in Jerusalem was highly significant. For them it was first and foremost the place where Yahweh chose to dwell. It was also the place where sacrifice was offered and consequently forgiveness of sins effected. Finally, it had enormous political significance, those running the Temple enjoyed great prestige. The Essenes, however, rejected the Temple; they regarded the high-priestly dynasty as invalid and refused to take part in the cult. Instead they worshipped within their own communities, as exemplified at Qumran, and looked for the day when a new Temple would be built. Finally, Josephus states that the Fourth Philosophy was in all respects like the Pharisees except that it was resolutely opposed to Roman rule, claiming that only Yahweh was king. Although Josephus exaggerates the importance of this sect, undoubtedly its values fed into subsequent revolutionary movements culminating in the Jewish War in 66 CE.

Into this mix Jesus proclaimed an alternative vision of the kingdom of God. through word and deed, teaching and parable he was engaged in consciousness raising. His message of radical obedience to God echoed the claims of the Fourth Philosophy but Jesus clearly advocated non-violence. To embrace the kingdom meant learning to live free from the claims of the Domination System. Jesus' healings and exorcisms released people from the crippling effects of disease and demonic oppression and restored them to full life in the community. His teaching and parables constructed an alternative world in which sins and debts were forgiven, cares and anxieties were to be set aside, sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes were welcome, women were accepted as equals, the lust for wealth and power was challenged and community relations were built on mutual trust, forgiveness and appropriate confrontation. Furthermore, in offering forgiveness of sins, Jesus explicitly challenged the continuing validity of the Temple. In questioning the Temple Jesus shared some of the concerns of the Essenes. So, Jesus shared the Pharisaic concern for purity but radically redefined what it meant to be pure, he shared the Essene critique of the Temple but, unlike Qumran, did not call for communities to withdraw from society, and he shared the Fourth Philosophy's desire to be free from domination but opposed their violent ideology. His teaching on avoiding the temptation to wealth and power was an implicit critique of the Sadducees. In every way, therefore, Jesus was creating an imaginative alternative to the options confronting people living in first century Palestine.

PROPHETIC ENERGISING

As Brueggemann demonstrates, it is the role of the prophet first to articulate an alternative to the dominant 'royal consciousness' and second to energise people to be able to engage this new vision. He states that there are three moves involved in such prophetic energising. First, the prophet offers appropriate symbols to counteract feelings of hopelessness. Jesus' healings, exorcisms and regular practice of table fellowship, thereby welcoming all who would join in, are powerful examples of such symbols. Second, the prophet brings to public expression hopes and yearnings that have been suppressed. Jesus' announcement of the coming kingdom of God serves this function. The Old Testament frequently speaks of God as king of both Israel and the whole earth. It also speaks of a day when God shall become king. In the midst of the stark reality of Roman occupation such texts must have been difficult to appropriate. Jesus' frequent talk of the kingdom of God would have powerfully rekindled the hope contained in these texts. Finally, the prophet must speak both metaphorically about hope and concretely about real newness. Jesus' use of parables and teaching about new life in the kingdom enable this.

PROPHETIC CRITICISING

The final role of the prophet is to critique the existing order. Jesus' itinerant status challenges the prevailing convention concerning security, his trenchant critique of the Pharisees and scribes challenges the existing religious order and his words and actions concerning the Temple strike at the heart of its legitimacy as a continuing symbol of the religious and political life of Israel.

Jesus, in particular, regularly warns Israel that if she continues on her current course judgment will be imminent. An example of this occurs in the Lukan version of the sign of Jonah saying (Luke 11:29-32). Matthew clearly equates the sign of Jonah with Jesus' death and resurrection (Matt 12:39-40). But reference to three days and nights is absent from the account in Luke. Instead, for Luke, just as Jonah became the sign for Nineveh so Jesus will be the sign for the generation he addresses (Luke 11:30). Note the future tense. Just as Jonah preached that Nineveh would be overthrown within forty days so Jesus was in effect saying that in rejecting his offer of a new way of being Israel, Jerusalem would be overthrown within the lifetime of the generation hearing him. This, of course, happened in 70 CE. This becomes more explicit in Luke 19:41-44. The irony is that the 'city of peace' failed to recognise the 'Prince of Peace' (Isa 9: 6; Luke 19:38) and embrace his message of peace (Luke 19:42) and so was destined for war within a generation.

JESUS AS PASTOR

The first reference to Jesus as shepherd is found in Mark 6:34. This occurs after Jesus had sent the twelve out on a preaching and healing mission. As a result of their successful mission, the crowds sought them out to such an extent that Jesus suggested they should get away to an isolated place. However, the crowds discovered where they were and followed them. Mark, echoing Num 27:17; 1 Kgs 22:17; Ezekiel 34 and Zech 10:2, describes the crowd as sheep without a shepherd. Jesus responds with compassion and begins to teach them. In other words, Jesus recognises that the appropriate pastoral response for people lacking direction is to teach them. In Matt 18:12-14 Jesus speaks of the person who has one hundred sheep and one goes away. The good shepherd will search for the one who went astray until he finds it and restores it to the fold. In John 10 Jesus specifically refers to himself as the good shepherd. According to this text, the shepherd is known by the sheep, protects the sheep from wolves and lays down his life for the sheep. Finally, in Matt 26:31 Jesus, quoting Zech 13:7, predicts that his disciples will scatter when he is taken from them. Jesus' pastoral role, therefore, combines teaching, care, relationship and protection.

READING THE SCRIPTURES PASTORALLY

The New Testament letters themselves are the primary pastoral genre. Through them communities are encouraged, built up, admonished and challenged. But the whole bible can be read through a pastoral lens allowing texts to speak to us in this dimension. The key text here is 2 Tim 3:14-17. This passage is often quoted in discussions on biblical inspiration and inerrancy but I want to focus on the practical dimension of this text. According to the writer the scriptures are able to do six things. First, they are able to bring the reader to salvation 'through faith in Christ.' This is the author's version of the Lukan Jesus' claim that all the scriptures point to him. Second, they are profitable for teaching, this resonates with Jesus as shepherd teaching the crowds in Mark 6:34. Third, they are able to rebuke and fourth, they provide correction; in this way they can provide material to guard against false teaching (a prime concern of the Pastoral Epistles). Fifthly, they provide training in righteousness. This could be construed as making upright and virtuous but such concepts cannot be divorced from the clear biblical use of righteousness as that which makes for right relationships and, therefore, its clear link to issues of justice. In this way there is also here a resonance with Jesus speaking of justice, mercy and faith as 'the weightier matters of the law' (Matt 23:23). Finally, they are able to equip readers 'for every good work.' Reading the bible, according to this definition, equips us for praxis. Once again ethics comes into focus.

A clear example of this in practice comes from 1 Cor 10:1-22. Paul draws on the Exodus narrative to remind the Corinthians that the wilderness account provides clear instruction for them. In particular, despite their 'baptism' and spiritual sustenance many of them perished due to a combination of idolatry, sexual immorality and lack of trust. In the same way, the Corinthians should not presume that their baptism (1:13-16) or their spiritual gifts (1:7) guarantee their standing before God (10:12). In particular, Paul refers back to this narrative to warn his readers against idolatry (10:14).

Paul's use of the Exodus narrative in this way is highly instructive and provides a paradigm for reading the Bible through a pastoral lens. Other retellings of aspects of the Old Testament narrative can be found, for example, in Acts 2:14-36; 7:2-53 and Hebrews 11. The narratives concerning biblical characters and significant events can be powerful sources for building up the Christian community. They provide warnings as to how not to behave, examples of obedient response to emulate, puzzling encounters with God to challenge our preconceived notions of how God should behave, and so on. As we shall see, even difficult texts, like the 'texts of terror' can provide material for instruction that equips us for the task of proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom of God. Outrage is sometimes the most appropriate response to a biblical text and this outrage can be the most effective route to spiritual insight and growth.

The paradigmatic Old Testament text for reading through a pastoral lens is, of course, Psalm 23. Here Yahweh is described as the shepherd who provides for all needs. The language is richly evocative and speaks of rest, well-being and restoration as prerequisites for engaging in social justice ('paths of righteousness') which can prove dangerous and make enemies (23:4-5). But Yahweh's presence and provision are found in the midst of conflict for social justice is engaged in 'for his name's sake.' As a result the psalmist experiences Yahweh's shalom. Here in a nutshell, in this most pastoral of Psalms, we find the biblical exhortation: love God and do social justice.

In Mark 6:34 Jesus is described as having compassion for the crowd because 'they were like sheep without a shepherd.' This is a prelude to a feeding miracle which is so significant that it is told no less than six times in the gospels. The feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle in Jesus' ministry that is recounted in all four gospels (Mat 14:13-21; Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-15) and the feeding of the 4,000 occurs in Matt 15:32-39 and Mark 8:1-10. In John 6 the feeding miracle precedes Jesus' discourse on the bread from heaven which has clear Eucharistic references (there is no account of the Last Supper in John). The first feeding miracle, which takes place in the wilderness, clearly echoes both Yahweh's provision for Israel in the wilderness in Exodus and 2

Kgs 4:42-44. The latter occurs in the context of famine in the land (2 Kgs 4:38). The combination of the feeding miracle and the phrase ‘sheep without a shepherd’ (echoing Ezek 34:2-6) suggests ‘a criticism of the political economy of Palestine and the ruling class who profits from it.’

Furthermore, the miraculous provision of food for the hungry masses also suggests a profound anti-imperial emphasis. Rome famously had the bread dole to feed its hungry citizens from the bread baskets of the empire. Jesus’ role in feeding the masses out of compassion is implicitly contrasted with Rome’s ability to do the same by means of military conquest (as Rome itself could not provide the grain to meet the needs of its population). The account in John is more explicit—as a result of the feeding miracle the crowd want to make Jesus king (John 6:15). The crowd perceive the provision of food as an imperial claim. Jesus specifically repudiates this. Finally, the combination of themes from Psalm 23 (the ‘green grass’ of Mark 6:39 echoes Ps 23:2) and the Eucharist suggest the imagery of a table prepared in the midst of occupied territory (Ps 23:5). Eucharistic feasting is to be a profound means of economic sharing which subverts the economy of empire. This Gospel rendering of Psalm 23 highlights that pastoral care helps to shape a community that is profoundly engaged with the world. One cannot read the scriptures pastorally without also reading them politically!

JESUS AS POET

After the seas are all cross’d (as they seem already cross’d),
After the great captains and engineers have accomplish’d their work,
After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist, ethnologist,
Finally shall come the poet worthy that name,
The true son of God shall come singing his songs.

According to the Gospels, Jesus’ parables were enigmatic and not easily understood (Mark 4:11-13); indeed, Mark claims that parables were Jesus’ characteristic form of speech (Mark 4:33-34). The poet, like the prophet, surprises us by using word imagery to unmask systemic injustice, evoke visions of an alternative world and inspire action. ‘[T]he power of poetry [is] shattering, evocative speech that breaks fixed conclusions and presses us always toward new, dangerous, imaginative possibilities.’

Jesus was a peasant artisan in a predominantly agrarian, peasant society. His parables were generally drawn from this world and consistently deal with political and economic issues highly relevant to peasant society. As Josephus records, social bandits (*lēstai*) were generally considered as heroes by peasant villagers. The crowd cried out for the release of Barabbas, a *lēstēs*, instead of Jesus at the crucifixion (John 18:40) and Jesus was crucified with two *lēstai* (Mark 15:27). Jesus draws specifically on the example of such social bandits in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35). It would appear that Jesus was attracted to the goals of social banditry in terms of social and economic justice but refused to endorse their violent methods. The parables of Jesus have a long history within Christendom of being read for the single moral point they are meant to be making. However, those reading from the margins have regularly produced readings of the parables sensitive to their political and socio-economic setting.

I have already drawn attention, in chapter 3 above, to the parable of the ten pounds in Luke 19:11-27. In this section I will highlight a couple of other parables which have lost their cutting edge over centuries of interpretation in Christendom.

THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED (MARK 4:30-32)

Mark effectively only has four story parables: three seed parables in chapter 4 and the parable of the wicked tenants in 12:1-12. The inclusion of the parable of the mustard seed, as the last of the seed

parables, is therefore significant for Mark. Most commentators note the proverbial nature of the smallness of the mustard seed in Jesus' time and see the point of comparison as being the largeness of the mature plant compared to the smallness of the seed. They also note reference to the birds nesting in its shade as echoing Ezek 17:22-24; 31:3-9 and Dan 4:10-12. Thus the point of the parable is that the kingdom of God, which begins in such an insignificant way with the ministry of Jesus, will grow spectacularly and provide protection for many. This interpretation fits well with Christendom as the triumph of Christianity.

However, if the point of the parable were to emphasise simply the growth of the kingdom into something significant then it would have made more sense to use the example of a tree, like the cedar, precisely as in the Ezekiel passages. But Jesus specifically draws on the mustard seed. The fully grown mustard bush cannot compare with the cedar if this were the point Jesus was trying to make. Rather, as Pliny notes in the first century CE, in his *Natural History* 19.170-71, the mustard plant, although beneficial, quickly gets out of hand and tends to take root where it is not wanted. Furthermore, as Jesus had already stated in the parable of the sower, the fact that it attracts birds is problematic for areas under cultivation (Mark 4:4). So, Jesus is much more likely to be emphasising the problem the kingdom of God poses to the establishment. It tends to flourish precisely where it is not wanted and attracts undesirables (as far as those in control are concerned).

The point, in other words, is not just that the mustard plant starts as a proverbially small seed and grows into a shrub of three or four feet, or even higher, it is that it tends to take over where it is not wanted, that it tends to get out of control, and that it tends to attract birds within cultivated areas where they are not particularly desired. And that, said Jesus, was what the Kingdom was like: not like the mighty cedar of Lebanon and not quite like a common weed, like a pungent shrub with dangerous takeover properties. Something you would want in only small and carefully controlled doses – if you could control it.

THE PARABLE OF THE DISHONEST MANAGER (LUKE 16:1-9)

This has proved to be one of the most puzzling of the parables in that Jesus appears to approve in some way the dishonest behaviour exhibited in the story. Particularly problematic is the master's commendation of his manager's actions which apparently had lost him money. Every detail of this parable is significant and highlights the harsh realities of economic life in first century Palestine.

First, this parable follows on immediately from the parable of the prodigal son and shows some affinity with it through the concept of 'squandering' (same verb in Greek) property (15:13; 16:1). This is important because the hearers of the parables in chapter 15 included tax collectors, sinners and Pharisees (15:1-2). The Pharisees are still listening at 16:14 so, by implication, the tax collectors and sinners, as well as the disciples (16:1), are also listening to this parable (and the subsequent one concerning the rich man and Lazarus). Jesus is particularly associated in the Synoptic Gospels with tax collectors and sinners. In Luke they appear, either in combination or separately, in 3:12; 5:27, 29, 30, 32; 6:32-34; 7:29, 34, 37, 39; 15:1-2; 18:10, 11, 13; 19:2, 7. Tax collectors should more appropriately be translated as toll collectors. In first century Palestine direct taxes were collected by tax collectors known as *dēmosiōnes* (a word never used in the New Testament), who were directly employed by the Roman authorities. The collection of other taxes was auctioned off to the highest bidder who became the chief toll collector, or *architelōnes* (Luke 19:2). The *architelōnes* would have a number of agents, *telōnai*, and these are the 'tax collectors' of the Gospels. They acted as tax farmers in the indirect taxation system. The *architelōnes* had to pay over the amount bid in advance to the authorities and then was expected to collect this by assessing and collecting tolls. This naturally led to abuse as unscrupulous collectors sought to maximise their own profits in the process (Luke 19:8). The sinners were those who, by virtue of not being included among the righteous, were of low socio-religious status and were 'counted among the excluded,

even damned.' On the other hand, it is possible that the term functioned in a quasi-technical way to refer to those in a state of irretrievable indebtedness. Either way, the sinners would certainly be numbered among the 'poor' to whom Jesus was bringing good news (Luke 4:18).

Second, the parable occurs in a decidedly Jewish context. For the terms used to describe the debts in verses 6-7 are Jewish rather than Roman measures (bath as a liquid measure and cor as a dry measure). This is significant when considering the percentage of debt written off in these verses as we shall see.

Third, the rich man (plousios) is both very rich and is no hero. The amount of debt owed in verses 6-7 is vast and indicates a landowner with considerable estates. In the context of Jesus' day these rich landowners ruthlessly exploited their tenant farmers. The rich, therefore, are regularly condemned in Luke. This is already hinted at in the Magnificat (1:53) and made specific in 6:24-25. The rich landowner of Luke 12:16-21 is condemned for accumulating wealth and not distributing it and it is virtually impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom of God (18:18-25). To be commended by such a person (16:8) demonstrates just how entrenched in the economic system of exploitation the manager is.

Fourth, the main character in the parable, the dishonest manager, would have been a retainer in the household of the rich landlord. He would not have been a slave as he is dismissed from his post. However, as a retainer, he was in a precarious position. He occupied a privileged place but enjoyed none of the security of a slave whose status as property of the master at least ensured ongoing accommodation. If the retainer should be dismissed he would no longer have a roof over his head and, deprived of his livelihood, he would become one of the expendables in society. To engage in digging (16:3) was the hardest kind of labour for the uneducated workman in the context of the day.

With nothing left to offer but his animal energy, the former steward will have little chance of competing for jobs with peasants who have worked all their lives or with the excess of village artisans who have fallen into the class of expendables. Having been accustomed to regular meals, he will adapt poorly to irregular meals interspersed with long periods of hunger. As he loses what little strength he has, he will become a beggar until, like Lazarus and thousands of others, he dies from the complications of malnutrition and disease. His dismissal from the stewardship is a death sentence.

The position that this retainer currently occupies, and which he dreads losing, is that of estate manager. As such he would have been given wide powers by his master to enter into binding contracts on the master's behalf. Under the laws of the day he could not be prosecuted for wrongdoing but could be shamed or dismissed. However, as estate manager, he would have been fully complicit in the exploitative economic activities of his rich master. The rich landowner would be concerned to receive maximum profit from his estate manager and would require proper accounting. However, it was common practice (and expected) that the manager would make his cut, outside of the books, before properly accounting to his master. This is significant and cannot mean that the reduction in debt was just the manager foregoing his cut, as many commentators state. For the original debt is clearly accounted for in the books.

Fifth, the debtors, due to the vast amount owed, would not be peasant tenants of the rich landlord. Instead they are to be seen as merchants in their own right and, as such, equally part of the economic system condemned in Luke. These merchants would have secured distribution rights to the landowner's crops. The fact that the debts are stated in terms of goods rather than monetary amounts means that they have contracted to dispose of those measures of goods.

Sixth, the different percentages of debts written off is significant. In the case of olive oil it represents 50% of the full amount; for wheat it represents 20%. It was common in those days to state the total amount of the debt incurred as a single figure that included principal plus interest. This amounted to charging interest (forbidden under Torah – the Jewish context is important) but hiding the fact by simply stating a single (inflated by the hidden interest) figure. These hidden interest rates varied depending on the degree of risk attached to the goods. Olive oil, as more susceptible to adulteration, is of higher risk than wheat, hence the greater interest rate. So what the estate manager is doing here is writing off the (unlawful) hidden interest charged on the transaction.

Seventh, the estate manager summons the debtors privately, one by one and insists that they renegotiate the contracts quickly (16:5-6). At this stage the debtors do not know that he has been dismissed and so they assume he has full authority to conduct these reductions in debt. In this way each of the debtors becomes indebted to the manager and, in the context of the day, would now be under an obligation to repay the favour. In this way the manager has secured for himself the means to avoid inevitable destitution following dismissal.

Finally, the deliberate reduction of the debts by the amount of hidden interest sends a clear message to the rich master.

By this move, the steward reminds the master just who has been taking chances to accumulate his wealth, including the questionable practice of charging de facto interest in spite of the prohibitions of the Torah and oral Torah. To preserve his social status, the master needs a steward who is willing to engage in these kinds of practices. This the steward has done. Whatever faults he may have do not include indolence in looking after the master's concerns. By his actions, therefore, the steward reminds the master of his value.

Finally, the steward displays his resourcefulness to the master. The debtors think that they have received a generous dividend from their master/patron, and in their joy, they overlook the obligation they have taken upon themselves. When the patron gives, he also indebts. By signing their revised [contracts] with the reduced amounts, the debtors have also signed a new contract with a different kind of hidden interest, and they will pay for their good fortune. Clients always do. The steward has not cheated the master; he has placed new cards in the master's hand. Seeing the steward's strategy and tactics, the master commends him for his shrewdness. The master has taken a short-term loss and has been reminded of the value of the steward, but he will realize long-term gains.

Little wonder that the master 'commended the steward of unrighteousness for operating shrewdly' (author's translation). The praise is in keeping with the master and forms a fitting conclusion to the parable. The steward belongs to the system of injustice (adikia) and has never left it; he has no intention of giving up and dropping out just because another anonymous enemy has launched a campaign to remove him. The master, who belongs to the same system of exploitation, recognizes a gifted steward when he sees one.

Using the example of how reducing debt 'works' in a fundamentally unjust economic system, Jesus urges similar 'shrewdness' in the use of money from his followers (16:8b-9). Specifically, this means practising Jubilee as proclaimed in the programmatic announcement of Luke 4:18-19. Debts are to be forgiven and possessions are to be given to the poor and in this way his followers inherit the kingdom (Luke 12:33-34; 14:33; 18:28-30; 19:8-9). However, there may also be a further point here. Given that the toll collectors form part of Jesus' audience, and given that Jesus is noted as keeping company with toll collectors, it may well be that Jesus himself actually commends the actions of the dishonest manager. Commentators have noted the ambiguity of 'the master' (ho kyrios) in 16:8a as this could either refer to the master of the parable or to Jesus. This ambiguity may be deliberate. If Jesus is commending the actions of the manager in the parable in the hearing

of the toll collectors then implicitly he could be encouraging the toll collectors to reduce the taxes they are collecting. This would be part of a strategy of tax resistance that is well documented amongst the peasant classes. It is, of course, only in Luke that the specific charge of tax resistance is raised against Jesus (23:2). Jesus the tax-resister would not be championed by Christendom. But in the contemporary environment, where in particular our taxes support the military machine, it should give us pause for thought.

LAMENT

Finally, Jesus the poet is not afraid to use lament as an appropriate response as can be seen particularly in his lament over Jerusalem (Matt 23:37-39). The lament form, with its outrage against injustice and longing for God's deliverance, is a regular feature of the Old Testament, as we shall see. As texts of lament are read today it is appropriate to take them up as protests to God against the apparent senselessness of the violence and injustice we see all around us.

SUMMARY

If we use the prophetic lens with which to read the bible we will allow biblical texts to enable us to imagine an alternative reality to the dominant culture – a reality in which God is powerfully at work, yet predominantly in hidden ways. We will also allow the biblical texts to energise us, bringing us hope of a future in which righteousness and justice are manifestly exercised. Finally, we will allow the biblical texts both to challenge us and to provide resources with which to confront the contemporary world we inhabit. Reading the bible through a pastoral lens will enable us to be comforted, rebuked and equipped for the task. Finally, reading through a poetic lens will enable false certainties to be challenged and open us up to fresh possibilities.

Furthermore, as stated above, these particular lenses coincide with specific genres: prophecy, epistle, wisdom literature and lament so that reading the Bible Christocentrically involves being sensitive to issues of genre. In the next few chapters I will seek to summarise the whole Bible paying particular attention to genre.