



Michał Wojciechowski

Uniwersytet Warmińsko-Mazurski, Olsztyn

m.wojciechowski@uwm.edu.pl

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5658-7512

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/BPTh.2020.005>

13 (2020) 1: 127–142

ISSN (print) 1689-5150

ISSN (online) 2450-7059

For and Against. The Bible on the State

Za i przeciw. Biblia o państwie

Summary. At the beginning, Israelites expected much from the newly installed royal power and tried to justify it theologically by a royal messianic ideology. However, the behaviour of monarchs led to disappointment and criticism. Living under the reign of their own rulers biblical authors formulated principles of good government and occasionally criticized evil kings. Later, under a foreign rule, they asked whether to submit to it or to fight it; both answers can be found in the biblical books, depending on the attitudes of the foreigners to the Jewish religion. The New Testament respects the state, and affirms the duties of the subjects, including paying taxes. However, if the state opposes to God, it has to be condemned (as in Revelation of John).

Streszczenie. Z początku Izraelici wiele oczekiwali od nowo wprowadzonej władzy królewskiej i próbowali ją uzasadnić teologicznie poprzez królewską ideologię me-sjańską. Postępowanie królów doprowadziło jednak do rozczarowania i krytyki. Żyjąc pod rządami rodzimymi, autorzy biblijni formułowali zasady dobrych rządów, a czasem krytykowali występnych królów. Potem, pod rządami obcymi, pytali, czy się im podporządkować, czy też walczyć z nimi. W księgach biblijnych można znaleźć obie odpowiedzi, zależnie od postawy obcych wobec religii żydowskiej. Nowy Testament szanuje państwo i potwierdza obowiązki poddanych, w tym płacenie podatków. Jeśli jednak władza państwowa sprzeciwia się Bogu, musi być potępiona (jak w Apokalipsie św. Jana).

Keywords: Bible; state; taxation; political power; nation; ancient Israel; royal ideology.

Słowa kluczowe: Biblia; państwo; podatki; władza; naród; Izrael starożytny; ideologia królewska.

The modern idea of separation between the state and the church was unknown to ancient minds. Therefore it is quite natural that the biblical books contain a great wealth of political opinions, although the relation between humans and God is more important for them. Most often they refer to the kingdoms and kings, because such was the most typical form of state power in the ancient world. We can deduce from the Bible some general views on the political power and the institution of state.

1. Introductory Remarks

Any fuller discussion on these questions can easily fill a book – and this article is indeed based on my book published in Polish.¹ I shall present here one important, fresh aspect of the problem; the data from the book, seen from a new angle, have had to be transformed and completed here.

Strikingly enough, the biblical opinions on the state are conflicting or even contradictory. Some of them tend to justify or even glorify the monarchy, other are sharply critical. It makes sense to advance now some hypothetical explanations of this situation which will help to understand the facts.

First of all, it seems that the institution of state is controversial in itself. Any honest description must mention both its advantages and its vices. The Bible presents both.

The next point is the historical development. The people of Israel had nourished some hopes related to monarchy, but later became disappointed with it. It seems that the earlier texts on monarchy are positive, or at least tolerant, the later ones more critical. Some of these later views were placed by the biblical

¹ This book (M. Wojciechowski, *Biblia*) contains the following headings: I. The history of Israel before Christ (including the question of the origin of the state). II. God and kings (power of God, royal ideology and messianism, tasks of the king, principles of government). III. Criticism towards the state in the Old Testament (bad kings, voice of prophets, Judges 9, 1 Samuel 8–12). IV. Pentateuch on the government (law above politics, Deut 17). V. Israel and empires (initial conflict, submission to foreign rule, persecutions). VI. Critical acceptance of the state in the New Testament (Mark 12 on taxation, distance towards the Roman state and Jewish rulers, authority from God in Romans 13, further texts). VII. Conflict and persecutions (life of Jesus and Paul, Rev 13–19 and the satanic side of the empire). Conclusions: The state has its lawful authority, both instituted and limited by God and his law. This institution has some justification, but also serious vices (godlessness, violence, high taxes). However, the citizens should obey the state which deals justly with them. Two closely related articles in Polish were derived from this book (M. Wojciechowski, *Biblijne*, and M. Wojciechowski, *Nauka*). Below I make an ample use of these works.

authors in books describing earlier history, but they should not be attributed to the early period.

There is also a difference between the opinions on the own kingdom and on the foreign empires. The first question, the value of the own state and its proper arrangement, dominated the pre-exilic thought. The relation to the empires became central after the fall of Jerusalem. Therefore, this second question is present in some later books of the Old Testament, including the Greek deuterocanonical books, and in the New Testament. From this point of view, the border line does not separate the Old and the New Testament, but rather pre-exilic and post-exilic history of the people of the Bible.

The biblical opinions on the state were quite often examined by scholars. We meet usually works related either to the ancient Israel² or to the texts from the New Testament.³ Therefore, a general overview and an interpretation are still needed.

The ideas on the state expressed in the Bible are related to judgments concerning the origin of this institution. Without touching the question of the historical beginnings of Israel, we may say that state ideology as presented in the Bible appealed to an ethnic solidarity of Israel, conceived as one people. The state would emanate from the nation.

The unity of the people was to a large extent an artificial construct. Nevertheless, the views on the state presupposed a vision of Israel as a nation, and this nation was seen as a large family. Deriving Israelites from a common ancestor was a symbolic way of making them relatives. In the Bible, we find some manifestations of national consciousness.⁴ Modern European nations have followed more or less this example.

This ethnic group called Israel lived without their own state in the twelfth and eleventh centuries BC; pre-Israelite tribes were sometimes led by charismatic chieftains called judges. The kingdom was born before year 1000 and with it the biblical reflection on the statehood came to being. As it was said before, criticism of the kingdom found in Judges and 1 Samuel reflects most

² See references below. There are some more recent general works related to this subject (e.g.: W. Houston, *Contending*; J.G. McConville, *God*; and especially W. Oswald, *Staatstheorie*); they have helped to improve the conclusions of this article.

³ At least ten recent studies from different angles analyze the problem (O. Cullmann, *The State*; W. Schrage, *Die Christen*; C.K. Barrett, *The New Testament*; E. Bammel, C.F.D. Moule (ed.), *Jesus*; R.A. Horsley, *Paul*; W.E. Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, which is the best one; Ch. Bryan, *Render*; A.T. Monera, *The Christian's Relationship*; Kim S., *Christ*).

⁴ D. Goodblatt, *Elements*; cf. M.G. Brett, *Nationalism*.

probably a later view, and it can be confirmed by a redactional analysis of these books; the themes which will be discussed later.

2. First Hopes

The circumstances of coming to power of the first two kings, Saul and David, prove that the defense against the enemies was an important motive of the creation of the kingdom and of the wide assent of the subjects. Even if this history was retold later, as an apology of David and his rights, the motive of defense seems essential. It corresponds to a basic justification of the state which is still repeated: it is necessary for the security of the nation. People desired safety and hoped that the king would assure it.

Two texts from the books of Samuel seem to formulate early expectations associated with monarchy. In 1 Sam 8.19–20 there is a summary of such expectations. The whole context, with a strong criticism of monarchy, seems to be added later. However, the words of the people wanting a king from Samuel can reflect early hopes related to the royal rule. In the biblical text, these words were linked with the election of Saul, although they could have been related to David as well.

The demand of the people was as follows: *We will have a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles* (RSV). The first aim, “to be like all the nations” is sinful in the context of the Bible, but it suggests that this phrase is a later interpolation. The remaining words can reflect early hopes and early formulations of the royal tasks. The king (*melek*) is to govern, more exactly to be a leader and a judge (*ušpathanu* from *špth*). Further words describe the king as a battle commander. It remains within the role attributed to earlier “judges”. However, the title of the king and “being over us” suggest a stable function and the right to giving orders, and not a temporary charismatic leadership. The people want things to be like before, but better and safer.

2 Sam 5.1–3 describes a treaty, a “covenant” made in Hebron between the Israelite elders and David, the leader of the tribe of Judah and former officer in the Saul’s army. It resulted in anointing him king over Israel. The Israelites summarized tasks and rights of David as follows: *We are your bone and flesh ... the LORD said to you: ‘You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel’* (RSV). The absence of later royal ideology suggests strongly that it is a faithful description of an early understanding of royal power. The king was named, or even hired by the people for specific tasks.

Bone and flesh imply family bond; the king is not a foreigner and cares for his relatives. The election results from an oracle. Image of the king as shepherd (in Hebrew a verbal form, *tir'eh*) was popular in the ancient Near East and in the Bible. It was applied to God as a ruler. This image suggests the right to direct the sheep, but also care and defense. David was to be also a prince, *nagid* in Hebrew, more exactly a chieftain, dealing not only with the military matters. It signifies that the subjects expected the ruler to care for their welfare and safety.

All that amounts to the concept that is defined as “minimal state”. It should care for the external security, maintaining an army able to fight the invaders. It should also provide justice in courts. An early Israelite historian attributed such notions to his ancestors, and with some justification, because such expectations would have been natural at the moment of passage from the tribal society to the monarchy. They could have inspired a moderate approval for the royal rule. People who lack security are ready to resign from some of their liberties and goods in order to preserve life and safety.

3. Royal and State Ideology

The kingdom, once established, had its ideology, a royal ideology, as we correctly say. At the beginning, messianic hopes constituted a political ideology of the Davidic dynasty. Messiah was simply a king, an anointed one. This ideology conveyed a conviction that the rule of David and his dynasty was established by God, with an intention to strengthen and assure their position through a religious justification. Disappointment with the kings and the fall of the dynasty made the messianic ideas more sublime. They were associated with a future, extraordinary king sent by God, and finally with eschatology.

All these facts are well known, but it is useful to repeat them in the context of the “biblical political science”. The messianic idea belongs to this current of biblical thought which is favorable to the royal pretensions and which looks at the kings with religious hopes as the early messianic ideology glorified the state and its order.

The basic text of this current is the so-called prophecy of Nathan (2 Sam 7). According to this text, the Lord had chosen David as a king and an adopted son; therefore he would assure a durable reign to his followers. However, after the words: *I will be his father and he shall be my son* (v. 14) there is a critical remark, probably a later addition: *When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men*. The divine support for the dynasty was seen as unconditional at first, but later, because of royal sins

and defeats, had to be perceived as dependent on the correct behaviour of rulers. However, disappointments began. The covenants between David (and his followers) and God also expressed the conviction that their rule had a divine support. These covenants should assure the durability of their reign (Ps 132.10–12; 2 Sam 23.5; 1 Kings 8.23–24; 2 Chr 13.5; 21.7). and they took ritual forms (1 Kings 11.17; 2 Kings 13.3). Many psalms honoured David as a ruler (Ps 2; 18; 20; 21; 45; 72; 89; 101; 110; 132; 144); however, Psalm 89 mentions both the eternal covenant (vv. 4–5.28–30) and a punishment for abandoning the divine Law (vv. 31–40). Thus it is a next trace of disappointment among panegyrics.

An ideal view of the future king from the line of David is continued in the prophetic books (e.g. Isa 7.14–16; 9.5–6; 11.1–4; cf. Mic 5.1–5; Jer 23.5–6). A justification of rulers can be found also in the wisdom literature where kings are supposed to rely on wisdom (Prov 8.15–16; 28.2; cf. 1 Kings 3; 5.9–14) which makes the rule legitimate. Kings were also supposed to be just judges (Prov 16.10,12,23; 20.8; cf. Sir 10.1,3), which seems to be a suggestion to them. The wise men recommended also obedience to rulers with numerous biblical witnesses proving that the institution of the state and the political power were widely approved.

4. After Hope Comes Disappointment

These programmatic praises of the kings, even if modified under the influence of harsh realities, were contradicted by another current of the biblical thought, opposed to monarchy, and indirectly to the institution of state. It appears that it was born from a disappointment with sinful rulers. Very expressive criticisms of the monarchy can be found already in the context of stories about early Israel, before the period of kings.

As it was mentioned, their literary features indicate that they were formulated later.⁵ Judean authors, writing the “deuteronomical history” from Joshua to Kings, applied the method of *vaticinium ex eventu*, putting condemnations of the kingship in the mouth of early heroes. This order signifies that they considered these critical remarks more important than numerous signs of approval for the royal rule they transmitted later. It is essential for the reader to know it in advance.

Gideon was said to refuse the royal dignity, arguing that only the LORD can be considered king (Judg 8.22–23). *I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you.* The same idea can be found in 1 Sam

⁵ R. Müller, *Königtum*.

8.7, where God says about the Israelites demanding a king: *They have rejected me from being king over them.* Monarchy and state are a concurrence for God and can be compared to idolatry (1 Sam 8.8–9; 12).

It is striking that this theological argument against the kingship, obviously of key importance for Gideon, Samuel and the deuteronomical storyteller, was not repeated by Samuel in his answer to the people's demand. Instead, he gave a down-to-earth and practical argument against the royal rule: exorbitant taxes. In his colourful speech he listed burdensome levies and services rendered to kings by their subjects (1 Sam 8.11–18).⁶ It appears then that the Israelites wished both a minimal state and a welfare state. For Samuel and for the biblical author, it was not realistic as the real state means taxes and forced labour rather than profits.

An equally sharp criticism of the kings results from the Jotham's fable from Judges 9.8–21. A mention of gods in plural (v. 9) proves that it was taken from the environment, which had had already some negative experiences with the kings. According to this fable, the power falls into the hands of the worst. Politicians are as weeds, dangerous for the honest and productive plants.⁷

⁶ The full text: ^{8.11} *He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; ¹² and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³ He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. ¹⁵ He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. ¹⁶ He will take your menservants and maidservants, and the best of your cattle and your asses, and put them to his work. ¹⁷ He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸ And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day"* (RSV).

A modern list could be: "After paying income tax, VAT, local taxes, all duties, charges and tolls, you will stay with a half of your wage. And do not forget the military service. And you will have to praise your welfare state; too late for complaints."

⁷ RSV: ^{9.8} *The trees once went forth to anoint a king over them; and they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us.'*

⁹ *But the olive tree said to them,*

'Shall I leave my fatness, by which gods and men are honored, and go to sway over the trees?'

¹⁰ *And the trees said to the fig tree,*

'Come you, and reign over us.'

¹¹ *But the fig tree said to them,*

'Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit, and go to sway over the trees?'

¹² *And the trees said to the vine,*

'Come you, and reign over us.'

¹³ *But the vine said to them,*

Other biblical books also contain various forms of criticism of the rulers, even if they are not so general in scope. The historical books of the Bible offer a long list of bad rulers severely judged because of their unfaithfulness to God. Warnings came from the mouths of the wise men, for example in Proverbs 19.12; 28.15–16; 29.2,12; 30.21–22 (cf. Eccles 5.7; 10.16). In addition, prophets engaged in politics, sometimes as royal followers, but sometimes in opposition also happened to speak very critically about kings (cf. Isa 9.15; 10.1–2; Hos 7.3–7; 10.15; 13.11; Jer 1.18; 2.18; 21.12; 22.2–5,13–19; Ezek 34.1–10).

5. How to Govern?

In answer to these experiences, biblical authors looked for a solution. It consisted in giving rules and advice concerning the royal power. Both hopes and criticisms related to the kings had already presupposed some moral ideas about the governing. The political power should care for the security and welfare of the subjects, judge justly, respect God and not be greedy. An excellent summary is given in Proverbs 29.4: *By justice a king gives stability to the land, but one who exacts gifts ruins it* (RSV; ‘gifts’ are taxes). The state is necessary for justice and security, but it also exploits the citizens. The rule of justice makes it strong, an excessive taxation makes it weak.

It would be natural to look for rules of government in the books of Law. However, an unprepared reader would be surprised, finding virtually nothing about the political power, although the laws included into the Pentateuch do contain a synthesis of Jewish legal traditions. An answer that under the Persian rule in the fifth century BC formulating such laws would be impossible, seems insufficient. Would old laws have been so censored?

The attitude of the Pentateuch seems to result from another motive. For its authors, law precedes political power. Contrary to the popular belief and modern constitutions, the political power is not by definition a lawgiver. According to the Bible, the law is given by God and people including rulers should submit to it. The Bible prefers a *nomocratia*, the rule of the law, as a recommended form of the government. Kings, judges, officials and citizens should serve the law.

‘Shall I leave my wine which cheers gods and men, and go to sway over the trees?’

¹⁴ *Then all the trees said to the bramble,*

‘Come you, and reign over us.’

¹⁵ *And the bramble said to the trees,*

‘If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.’

However, in the Pentateuch we have one law concerning directly the king. It stems from the deuteronomical tradition and therefore can be associated with times of Josiah. It is transmitted by Deuteronomy 17.15–20.⁸ The message of this text contains the following points: the ruler is one of the people and not a foreigner, he should not elevate himself, he should follow and enforce the written divine law and he should not increase his treasury, harem and army. Contrary to the traditions of the Near East and to the biblical royal ideology, the royal power should be limited.

6. Double Stance Towards the Empires

Since the fall of Jerusalem (586 BC) the land of Israel was occupied by foreign empires: Babylonia, Persia, Hellenistic kingdoms and Rome. As I have already mentioned, this new situation inspired a new question: how to live under the foreign rule? To fight or not to fight? To resist or to submit?⁹

The first answer to the aggressive empires such as Assyria and Babylonia was their spontaneous condemnation, expressed in prophetic oracles against the nations. Fight was a natural response, and submission was rejected, unless absolutely necessary. Even if empires were sometimes recognized to be the instruments of God, they remained bitter enemies (Isa 10.5–7; Jer 25.9).

However, far-looking Jeremiah recommended to the exiled a normal life (Jer 29.5–7) so in time settling abroad became normal and obvious. Therefore the Persian rule was approved and even acclaimed with Persian king becoming a liberator and even a “messiah” (Isa 41.1–4; 44.28–45.7). The second answer

⁸ RSV: ¹⁴ *When you come to the land which the LORD your God gives you, and you possess it and dwell in it, and then say, 'I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are round about me';* ¹⁵ *you may indeed set as king over you him whom the LORD your God will choose. One from among your brethren you shall set as king over you; you may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother.* ¹⁶ *Only he must not multiply horses for himself, or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to multiply horses, since the LORD has said to you, 'You shall never return that way again.'* ¹⁷ *And he shall not multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away; nor shall he greatly multiply for himself silver and gold.* ¹⁸ *And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, from that which is in the charge of the Levitical priests;* ¹⁹ *and it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them;* ²⁰ *that his heart may not be lifted up above his brethren, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left; so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.*

⁹ More in Wojciechowski, *The Bible and To Fight*.

to the empires was proclaimed: submission and seeking favors. It signified that a religious Jew was allowed to look for a career at foreign courts, if only he remained loyal to his religion and to Jewish community. Such careers are pictured in books of Nehemiah and Esther, and also in Tobit and in the first part of Daniel.

However, when the empire becomes enemy and persecutor or when the ruler has divine pretensions, people of God should resist. Such resistance can be passive or active. Sections of Daniel concerning idolatry, imperial beasts (Dan 7) and persecution revived the prophetic condemnations of enemies. It corresponds to the period of Maccabean uprising in the second century BC.

Accordingly, 1 Maccabees stressed the military and political fight for independence. It had religious motives, as it was aimed at the restoring the temple cult and enforcing the ancestral Law. Thus, fighting is just, useful and necessary.

2 Maccabees attributes victory to piety and martyrdom, thanks to which God forgives and helps his people. Religious, political and military factors are intertwined. The same can be said about the book of Judith, where the invaders seek to destroy both Israel and her religion.

On the one hand, we meet here Israel, the people of God, and charismatic leaders, whereas on the other hand, we have the external world and foreign nations with their kings. They are tolerated, when they are favorable to the Jews or at least not aggressive, but condemned when they endanger people and religion.

7. New Testament Approval for the Roman Rule

Similar attitudes are manifested in the New Testament. Because of a very small number of first Christians, they had neither political influence nor aspirations. They formulated no rules for the empire, but only suggestions, how to behave in the imperial system and how to judge it.

The response to the imperial world in the New Testament has become recently a popular subject of studies.¹⁰ Scholars look for political meaning of many texts and seek allusions to the empire, sometimes without good reasons. I shall concentrate on the basic texts, throwing light on the conflicting attitudes towards the empire.

Two popular texts express an approval for the Roman rule, including paying taxes. In Mark 12.13–17 (cf. Matthew 22.15–22; Luke 20.20–26) the key

¹⁰ W. Carter, *The Roman Empire*; Porter, Westfall, *Empire*; Winn, *Introduction*.

problem is whether the taxes to Caesar should be paid.¹¹ In Mark, the question concerned *kensos*, poll-tax. Its amount was several denarii a year and it was paid directly to Roman officials, which signified submission. From this source both army and administration were financed. Jesus said: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." By this answer, Jesus approved the basic principles of the Roman rule, rejected by some of his compatriots for the religious and nationalistic grounds. As this tax was moderate, we have here no answer to the question of high taxes.

The apologists of political powers often stressed Jesus' words "render to Caesar", but it does not correspond to his intentions, as he added "and to God the things that are God's." For any believer, it must be immediately clear that God is more important than the king. The duties towards the state and its ruler should be fulfilled, but without neglecting duties towards God.

Another popular text is Rom 13.1–7,¹² which is also discussed in an ample secondary literature.¹³ It was similarly misused for an apology of the governing authorities, although Paul wrote that authority (*ousia*) stems from God, and not from a system of government. A government has his authority from God, and not from himself.

Nevertheless, Paul did recommend a submission to the authorities, appealing to principles of order, hierarchy and discipline. He assumed that the gov-

¹¹ RSV: ¹³ *And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to entrap him in his talk.* ¹⁴ *And they came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are true, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"*¹⁵ *Should we pay them, or should we not?"* *But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a coin, and let me look at it."*¹⁶ *And they brought one. And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?"* *They said to him, "Caesar's."*¹⁷ *Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's"* *And they were amazed at him.*

¹² RSV:¹ *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.*² *Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.* ³ *For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval,* ⁴ *for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer.*⁵ *Therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience* ⁶ *For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.*⁷ *Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.*

¹³ For example, L. Pohle, *Die Christen*; J. Załęski, *Chrześcijanin*; also R.A. Horsley, *Jesus*; R. Bauckham, *The Bible*, an interesting, but idiosyncratic text)

ernment punished the evildoers and rewarded the just. In this respect rulers are helpers of God and they may use violence, including killing evildoers or collect taxes.

This ideal view of the political power has two sources. Firstly, humans as social beings need order and law which are morally justified and not only imposed by force. Paul approved of an ancient theory about the organic nature of society,¹⁴ as illustrated by 1 Cor 12.12–30. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’” (1 Cor 12.21). It was a popular argument for hierarchy and cooperation in the society. Secondly, the Roman government of his times can be considered just; Nero was still under age and the empire was run by Seneca. Similar arguments are advanced in 1 Pet 2.13–17 (cf. Tit 3.1–2; 1 Tim 2.1–2). The current of approval for the foreign empire is well represented in the New Testament books.

8. Among the Persecutions

An aggressive and hostile face of the empire was obviously known to the New Testament writers. However, their reactions to oppression and persecutions were not unified.

Their criticism did not imply an instant rejection of the political and legal system or a call for resistance. They could recommend patience or even martyrdom instead. Paul, even if unjustly prosecuted, made use of legal means of defense. The Gospels presents the death of Jesus as a misuse of power, but without questioning the legality of Roman courts.

On the other hand, the Revelation of John condemned the Roman empire.¹⁵ It followed the confrontation with its hostility under Nero (64–68 AD) and Domitian (about 90 AD), when this book was most probably written as such evil power could not be approved.

Numerous texts of the Revelation contain symbols referring to the persecutions (Rev 11–13; 17–18; cf. 2.13). The Roman empire is a cruel and dangerous beast, whose power stems from the dragon, or the Satan (Revelation 13). The

¹⁴ Platon, *Respublica* 5.10; Aesop, *Fabulae* 159 (Chambry) = 130 (Perry) = 132 (Haustrath); Plutarch, *Coriolanus* 6; Livius, *Historia* 2.32.9–12. Cf. Romans 12.4–8; Ephesians 4.11–16; Collosians 2.19. More has been written about this metaphor (cf. H. Gombel, *Die Fabel*; D. Peil, *Der Streit*; J.K. McVay, *The Human Body*).

¹⁵ The political message of the Revelation has been a popular subject of studies (cf. e.g. P. Abir, *Bible*; C. Bedriñán, *La dimensión*; O. O'Donovan, *The Political Thought*; E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Religion*; T. Söding, *Heilig*; A. Yarbro Collins, *The Political Perspective*).

beast wants to be worshipped and Rome is presented as Babylon or a great harlot. Pagan religion and Roman ideology are pictured as a second beast, a false prophet, or prostitution. It equals to an outright condemnation. This empire has totalitarian features, controlling politics, religion and everyday life (Rev 13.15–17).¹⁶

The Roman empire is not perceived as having a legal authority or even as neutral and external. It is by nature hostile, satanic and nasty (Rev 17.5: “And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: ‘Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth’s abominations’”). The symbolic language allows to apply it to similar empires from the history of the world.

For these reasons empires are to be annihilated. Present day catastrophes, presented in an exaggerated and symbolic manner, are a foretaste of the future. However, the final victory over the empires will come in the last days, after the return of Christ, and therefore will be the work of God. The author did not expect that the iniquity of the political power could be eliminated quickly. Apocalypse now, victory later.

Therefore the Revelation did not appeal to an armed resistance although it condemned strongly an unlawful and totalitarian power. It did not follow the example of many Old Testament texts, condoning the active resistance to godless and brutal invaders. There is no doubt about the condemnation of the empire, but the answer to it is not fight but persistence and Christ.

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In the Bible as a whole the question of the state is not presented as resolved. The institution of state has good and evil aspects. The unjust state is condemned, but the problem of an answer to it is left without a final solution. To fight or to overcome evil with good? Perhaps both answers are possible, depending on the situation as no absolute formula is proposed.

The Bible perceives the state from the theological point of view, assuming the primacy of God over the world. The Bible approves of the existence of political power, and even explains its authority as an effect of the divine will. However, it expects that the state should be just and serve to its subjects. The divine law should be above human laws.

¹⁶ RSV: ¹⁵ *And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast should even speak, and to cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain.* ¹⁶ *Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead,* ¹⁷ *so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name.*

This demand is far from being fulfilled. Therefore the biblical books criticize sharply rulers and states they talk about. The sins of the political power are self-divinization, fiscal exploitation and many forms of violence, including fight against religion. Such state is condemned as satanic. An active resistance against it is recommended in the Old Testament, whereas the New Testament avoids this conclusion although announces a violent end of empires.

Putting it into modern terms: the state is useful for the sake of security and justice. It should enforce a good and stable law. Such political order is morally good as it corresponds roughly to the concept of minimal state, respecting the rights of citizens. However, the state which tends to go beyond these limits, demanding divine honours, high taxes and recurring to violence opposes to the biblical principles.

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