

THE BIBLICAL ROOTS OF AMERICAN MESSIANISM

BY ROBERT JEWETT AND JOHN SHELTON LAWRENCE

GARY BAUER, THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE WHO RAN AGAINST BUSH IN THE REPUBLICAN PRIMARIES OF 2000, SAID, "There is a very strong feeling in the evangelical world that ... Somehow God was working to put into the white house a man whose life had been transformed by accepting Christ ... Then, when 9/11 happened, there was this sense that God had blessed us ... God put George Bush there for a time like this."¹

After 9/11, Bush quickly earned a reputation as America's most overtly religious president remarks at the Washington National Cathedral service 14 September 2001, he promised from the pulpit a world-scale mission "to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil".² Since then, Bush's world-redemptive rhetoric has included biblical allusions, lines of Scripture, and fragments of Protestant hymns with attitudes that have pleased evangelical supporters like Bauer. On the occasion of his first anniversary address for 9/11, the President lifted the light metaphor from John 1.4–5 to celebrate the USA's achievement: "This ideal of America is the hope of all mankind ... That hope still lights our way. And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it." In other words, America becomes the light of the world.³

While such examples remind us that we live in an extraordinary period of religiosity and national pride, understanding the current situation demands that we recognise a much older relationship between the Bible and America's civic pieties.⁴ Biblical images of peacemaking through war have appeared regularly during America's times of crisis. We must also notice that this conception of peacemaking through military action stands in tension with the American constitutional system – also influenced by certain biblical themes – that envisions conflict resolutions in voting booths, courtrooms, public discussion places, and in diplomacy. To clarify this complex set of historical entanglements, we sketch here just a few elements in America's history of biblical messianism.

The Newly Chosen People

A representative expression of the world-redemptive impulse in America's civil religion is provided by Herman Melville's 1850 novel, *White-Jacket*: "We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people – the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world ... Long enough have we been skeptics with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether, indeed, the political Messiah had come. But he has come in us, if we would be give utterance to his promptings."⁵

Here we see the union of religious and secular terminology to convey the sense of mission. While the language of "chosen people" and "political Messiah" is seldom heard at present, the values and emotions of Melville's project continue to resonate in promises "to rid the world of evil", advanced by Bush to a receptive public.

Somewhat later than Melville, the Spanish-American War period prompted a missionary call for nothing less than redeeming the entire world. Senator Albert J. Beveridge, an ally of President Theodore Roosevelt, claimed precisely this in his exhortation to the US Senate: "Almighty God ... has marked the American people as the chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world. This is the divine mission of America ... We are the trustees of the world's progress, guardians of the righteous peace." Adding a biblical gloss, Beveridge quoted from Matthew 25.21: "Ye have been faithful over a few things; I will make you ruler over many

things.”⁶ President Woodrow Wilson continued this tradition when he assured citizens that, “America had the infinite privilege of fulfilling her destiny and saving the world.”⁷

Even though separated by centuries in time and by disparities in terminology, these older concepts match, to an amazing degree, their current mythic counterparts in American foreign policy. But the military emphasis so prominent today should not obscure the fact that there are actually two separate tributaries that run from the pages of the Bible down through American history. Each bears a distinctive approach to the world-redemptive mission.⁸ The first tradition is *zealous nationalism*. It seeks to redeem the world through the destruction of enemies. Alongside it runs a tradition of *prophetic realism*. It avoids the stances of complete innocence and selflessness. It seeks to redeem the world for coexistence through structures of impartial justice that exclude favoured status for any individual nation. It also has biblical inspirations, though from passages that are quite different from those popular with zealous nationalists.

Our conviction is that these two interwoven biblical strands have always been incompatible, and that the strain of mating them has reached a dead end in “the war on terror”. The crusading impulse of zealous nationalism and the constitutional legacy of prophetic realism could remain in uneasy wedlock in earlier times, but not in a time of jihad, when serious adversaries like Al Qaeda exhibit world-crusading tendencies.

As critics of religion in American national life, our own faith lies with prophetic realism as a means to cope with terrorism. However tempting military power may be, we favour the resolution of zealous conflicts through cooperation with agencies of international law. Crusades inspired by zealous nationalism are inherently destructive, both for America and for the world.

The Rise Of America’s Millennial Mission

A distinctive sense of mission to redeem the entire world marked the first generation of immigrants in New England. The Puritans derived from Revelation their dualistic worldview and their belief that violence would inaugurate God’s kingdom. They thought of themselves as standing in the succession of Christian warriors and martyrs that John Foxe had delineated from the Bible down to sixteenth-century England. As Winthrop Hudson explained, “The New England story was viewed as a continuation of John Foxe’s narrative of the pitched battles between Christ and Antichrist that had marked the course of human history from the beginning.”⁹ Preachers such as John Davenport, John Cotton, Increase and Cotton Mather, and Thomas Hooker worked on the task of building a holy and invincible commonwealth. Between 1629 and 1640, when their cause declined in England, more than 20,000 Puritans emigrated to America with this in mind. It was the call to battle that quickened their spirits, and they were convinced that such warfare had to be waged in the civil realm against the forms of corruption they felt were afflicting England. John Fiske said they were animated with “the desire to lead godly lives and to drive out sin from the community”.¹⁰ Their hope was that with the successful completion of such a war, the millennial kingdom promised in Revelation would surely arrive.

Michael Walzer has pointed out the decisive role of such ideas among Puritan radicals: believed “the saints did know the purposes of God ... Beginning at some point before 1640, a group of writers ... began the work of integrating the spiritual warfare of the preachers with the apocalyptic history of Daniel and Revelation. The

religious wars on the continent and then the struggle against the English king were seen by these men as parts of the ancient warfare of Satan and the elect.”¹¹

The zealous leaders shifted the thousand-year kingdom of Revelation 20 from the past to the immediate future and used martial categories to reinterpret the role of the saints. When the revolution came in England, preachers rose to proclaim the final battle with Satan. Stephen Marshall exhorted the troops in Parliament in 1644: “Go now and fight the battles of the Lord ... Do now see that the question in England is whether Christ or Antichrist shall be lord or king.” Henry Wilkenson wrote that Parliament’s “business lies professedly against the apocalyptic beast and all his complices”.¹² The battle was directed against the Cavaliers and moral corruption everywhere. The purge of heretics, worldlings, and the licentious was viewed as part of the same battle by which “the whore of Babylon shall be destroyed with fire and sword”.¹³ Such terminology derives almost exclusively from Revelation.

With the revolution’s overthrow in 1660 England, Puritans saw the American colonies as the new bearers of Protestant destiny. Increase Mather returned to Boston the following year “believing it was the last stronghold of Protestantism”.¹⁴ Ernest Tuveson has noted the impact of Jonathan Edwards’ idea that with the conversion of the New World, the last corner of the globe, “divine providence is preparing the way for the future glorious times of the Church, where Satan’s kingdom shall be overthrown throughout the whole habitable globe”.¹⁵ Frederic Baumgartner confirms that “for the Puritans, the French and Indian War in North America also served as a millennial event ... The French and their native allies served Antichrist by waging war on the people of God, and their early victories were signs that the great tribulation was beginning. The British victory in turn confirmed the deeply-held belief among the English colonists that they were a chosen people building the New Kingdom in America.”¹⁶

The Civil War Clash Between Zealous Nationalism And Prophetic Realism

It was during America’s Civil War era that Southern zeal and Northern zeal tore the nation apart. In the North, the crusade against slavery had long been buttressed by millennial premises and had directed its attack against the gradual processes of legislative restraint. William Lloyd Garrison employed biblical metaphors to describe the American Constitution as a “covenant with death and an agreement with hell”.¹⁷ The impulses of prophetic realism during this tragic conflict came to expression most prominently in Abraham Lincoln, and especially in his Second Inaugural address of 1865. Reflecting his appreciation for military contingency and moral uncertainty, he modestly remarked: “The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as to myself, and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.” Lincoln saw no connection between the justice of the Union’s causes and the certainty of its victory. Extending the theme of moral ambiguity, Lincoln notes not only the irony that “both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God” for opposite ends, but also that neither was completely justified in its assessment of the holiness of its cause. Lincoln thrust aside the sense of moral superiority that sustains zealous warfare since “the Almighty has His own purposes”.¹⁸ Divine judgment had fallen on “both North and South,” and in some mysterious and tragic fashion the continued suffering of both may have its meaning in the impartial will of God. The thrust of Lincoln’s argument shatters the simple identification of either side with God’s justice while simultaneously affirming each side’s common humanity. And since every group’s version of “the right” is subject to the provisos of prophetic realism, the group must never hold to it with

fanaticism, showing disrespect for the value of life in the process.

Charity and realism flow from Lincoln's tempered stance. Spared from fanaticism by his conception of an impartial divine justice, he felt free not only to respond charitably to the needs of others but also to deal realistically with the tangled historical responsibilities of slavery and the war. The realism is visible in his grasp of what truly makes for "a just, and a lasting peace" – not annihilation of the wicked, but care for the victim. By repudiating zealous appropriations of divine purpose, Lincoln sought to open the nation to its emotional resources of mercy and common sense. He did so without scuttling the sense of national mission and without leaving the nation adrift on a trackless, amoral sea.

The Future Of The Conflict

In *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism*, we analyse the biblical components in important moments of military and diplomatic history when the modest zeal for righteousness of a Lincoln confronts the crusading zeal that leaps to warfare. The promise of victory as a reward for piety, which produces the kind of unrealistic assessment visible in the current dilemma with Iraq, is shown to be countered by some prophetic ideals and critiques from Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jesus. Our book ends by sketching a vision toward which the nation might strive – weaving from the warp of traditional American ideals and the woof of Isaiah's dream of government's role in ushering in the age of coexistence. It is not an alien vision, though it is vastly different from the one America has recently followed. It lies buried in one half of our nation's divided heart, smothered by its long fusion with an incompatible, zealous counterpart.

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¹Nina J Easton, "The power and the glory: who needs the Christian Coalition when

you've got the White House?", in *The American Prospect*, 20 May 2002, p. 20.

² George W Bush, "National Day of Prayer and Remembrance for the Victims Of the Terrorist Attacks on September 11, 2001", a speech at the Washington National Cathedral service on 14 September 2001.

³ See Jeffrey S Siker, "President Bush, Biblical Faith, and the Politics of Religion", in *Society of Biblical Literature Newsletter*, www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleId=151; this special issue of the SBL Newsletter is dedicated to the theme "Bush's Bible". See also Jim Wallis, "Dangerous Religion", in *Sojourners Magazine*, Sept–Oct 2003, pp. 20–6; also posted at www.sojo.net.

⁴ See the concise summary in Robert Wuthnow, "Civil Religion", in Robert Wuthnow (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 153–7.

⁵ Herman Melville, *White-Jacket, Or The World in a Man-of-War*, cited from *The Works of Herman Melville*. Reproduced from the Standard Library Edition (16 vols. [1922-24], Russell & Russell, Inc., Publishers, 1963), Vol. VI, p. 189. *White-Jacket* was first published in 1850. The statement is in the author's narrative voice.

⁶ *Congressional Record* (56th Cong., 1st Session), Vol. 33, p. 711.

⁷ Cited by Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 212.

⁸ The contradictions within American civil religion derive in large part from these competing tributaries.

⁹ Winthrop S Hudson (ed.), *Nationalism and Religion in America: Concepts of American Identity and Mission* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 7.

¹⁰ John Fiske, *The Beginnings of New England; or, The Puritan Theocracy in Its Relations to Civil and Religious Liberty* (Boston: Houghton & Mifflin, 1889), p. 147.

¹¹ This ancient warfare had begun with Jews and Philistines, and would continue until Armageddon. Michael L Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 291.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 295.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

¹⁴ Perry Miller, "Preparation for Salvation in Seventeenth-Century New England", in Paul Goodman (ed.), *Essays in American Colonial History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1967), p. 178.

¹⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *History of the Work of Redemption* (New Haven: New York, 1989), cited by Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, p. 100.

¹⁶ Baumgartner, *Longing for the End* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999), p. 131.

¹⁷ This vision of the national mission is clearly derived from Revelation 20, wherein the saints rule the earth after the destruction of the beast.

¹⁸ Don E Fehrenbacher (ed.), *Abraham Lincoln: A Documentary Portrait Through*

His Speeches and Writings (New York: Signet, 1964), p. 278.