



Making Captains of us all

by Colin J D Greene

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It will not have escaped the attention of readers of this magazine that its full title is *The Bible in TransMission*. That is because the implicit presupposition informing the debates we seek to generate in these pages is the crucial and fundamental question of the recovery of the Bible as Scripture. Or, to put it another way, is the Bible merely an object of historical, literary and cultural interest or is it also a sacred text? If the latter, then will it still enable us to hear the living Word of God amidst the cacophony of voices that continually assault and seduce us in this word-weary, image-driven postmodern society?

Whether the primary issue we are investigating is the relationship between the burgeoning interest in film and the arts and the implications of all this for Christian faith or the desperate need for the church to emerge from the lengthening shadows of Christendom and face our present cultural situation with renewed missionary energy and vision, always the underlying presupposition is, what role does the story that the Bible recounts play in all this?

In this issue we deliberately thrust that primary consideration to the forefront of our discussions. For a number of years now we have been creating and nurturing significant partnerships with the capacity to generate a community of scholarship. A good example are those presently involved in the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar, who are eager to address the issue of the recovery

of the Bible as Scripture, utilising all the theological, literary, missiological and philosophical skills at their disposal.

By way of introducing the debate and discussion that will ensue in these pages, let me refer to an amusing episode that took place when the Emperor Napoleon I was reviewing some of his troops in Paris. In the midst of the proceedings the Emperor turned to one of his generals and issued an order, at the same time thoughtlessly dropping the bridle upon his horse's neck. The animal instantly set off at a gallop, and the Emperor was obliged to cling to the saddle. At this moment a common soldier of the line sprang before the horse, seized the bridle, and respectfully handed it to the Emperor. "Much obliged to you, Captain," said the Emperor; so by this one word instantly making a common soldier an officer. The man caught the Emperor's meaning, believed him, and saluting, quickly responded, "Of what regiment sire?" Napoleon, amused by his faith, replied, "Of my Guards" and galloped off!

It is of course, as Kevin Vanhoozer reminds us, quite amazing and exhilarating the actions we can perform with words, whether you are an Emperor or not! This takes us to the heart of the matter. So often in our colleges, universities, schools and indeed our churches a lack of courteous respect for the potentially unruly energy and sheer creative power of Scripture sets the would-be interpreter galloping off in all sorts of dangerously subjective

and exegetically destructive directions. The hermeneutic or interpretative facility we presently need to cultivate should never try to tame or supplant that sheer raw, angular and at times deeply threatening and mysterious energy that the Bible, understood as the creative Word of God, continually evokes. Instead, we work towards a skill that allows the Bible properly to complete its divinely given task, namely, to address us in a language which, allows word- and world-weary foot soldiers who have continually lived under an oppressive chain of command, to be liberated into a new kingdom where all are officers by divine appointment and share in the king's inheritance.

The contributors to this issue of *The Bible in TransMission* all seek to point us in the direction of just such a liberating hermeneutic that can free us both from turning the Bible into a fossilized relic of the past, or an unreal Disneyland of modern consumerist expectations. If historical critical study of the Bible at its worst often contributed to the former malaise then the often uncritical, highly subjective, success and prosperity-orientated use of the Bible in some of our churches leads us up the blind alley of the latter possibility. Similarly in our study and investigation of the Bible, whether it be to try and discern the authors' intention, or locate the exegetical bridge that links an ancient set of meanings with that of our present age, there are times, as Jacques Derrida reminds us, when the attribution of meaning must

simply be deferred or postponed.

Why? Well not necessarily because we lack the proper critical skills of investigation, but because Scripture refuses to be pressed into the service of those who use it to fight their own battles rather than accept its invitation to enlist in an altogether more important war, which, as Paul reminds us, is quite literally the transformation and renewal of the human imagination (Rom 12.2). Or as Emil Brunner put it more succinctly, "I can know myself as a person only where I feel my existence grounded in responsibility, and that means where I know myself to be created by and in the Word of God".

The recovery of the Bible as the creative energising, liberating Word of God remains, as one would expect, high on our current agenda. All the contributors to this issue point us in that direction. It is, therefore, heartening to discover that amidst the often startling and perplexing pluralism of contemporary hermeneutics a new consensus in biblical interpretation, which will contribute greatly to the renewal of biblical studies, just might be beginning to emerge. ■