

The promise of hermeneutics for the Church

by Andrew Wood

The Revd Andrew Wood is a Methodist minister in Surbiton, Surrey. He is Convenor of the Methodist Apologetics Group and a member of the ecumenical Mission Theology Advisory Group.

As the churches in the West face this new millennium, we are offered many diagnoses of our ills, many strategies for a way forward, writes Andrew Wood. The problem is not too few but too many remedies – and yet the most obvious one escapes us. Is there a way of reading, and being read by, the Bible, which can open new ways for people to live faithfully in our world and inhabit the world of the Bible?

Hermeneutics has great promise here. It has offered to the Church in Latin America and Africa a way of understanding Scripture as stories of liberation. What does it offer to us, the Church in the West? As in other contexts, it offers to renew our perception of this world and the Church's place in it and for it. Practical hermeneutics are, however, often largely absent from analyses of the Church. MacLean & Thompson's research on mainstream churches in North America, as only one recent example, speaks movingly on the need to nurture an open church, but is largely silent on the resources of Scripture.¹

In our Western context, in the words of one study: "Truth is stranger than it used to be".² Old systems of authority and meaning have collapsed for many people – they will no longer listen to the church as church, and answering the question: "who am I, and how am I doing?" has become a personal not a shared quest. This is summed up in an Orange mobile phone ad: "I make my own world, and take it with me". Or, in the words of Isaiah 53.6: "we all have turned to our own way", in a kind of pathological

exercise of choice. People in churches, as people outside, are tempted by this exercise of personal choices and personal judgement, often at the expense of the Church's ministry and mission.

In the Church we hear each other's voices and stories alongside the story of God. In this, hermeneutics offers *narrative* as a category to help us understand humanity, Church and Bible. Paul Ricoeur has argued that in the end we are given our identity by the stories we inhabit – people choose and are chosen by their stories (be they family histories, careers, vocations, spiritual quests); people are also shaped by their stories – stories give people their strong sense of who they are *in and through time*³. Only narrative, according to Ricoeur, can bring the dissonant notes of a life into a unity which is capable of being told. Ricoeur calls this unity "concordant dissonance". He memorably described life as a story in search of a narrator, meaning that human beings are lost until we find the words and a plot to describe our own lives. We are given that vocabulary by the life and person of Jesus, and are free to testify to that sense of being

found. The place where we uniquely do that is in the Church. There are problematic issues (What of those without memory, those unable to "imagine" themselves in this way? How do we decide on the truthfulness of any story?) but narrative remains for me the most creative way of being church.

So much for hermeneutical theory. Why should the Church privilege the Bible as a tool for sharing and opening stories? First, as a matter of *identity*. Christians are defined as they place their stories alongside God's story. As we read it together, we find in the "concordant dissonance" of the story of the people of Israel, and the discipleship of the first followers of Jesus, ways of seeing our own lives. We are also invited to see our lives in relation to one story, that of Jesus of Nazareth. Second, as a matter of *mission*. For Walter Brueggemann the greatest task facing the Church is: "to feed, nourish, legitimise and authorize a counter imagination of the world"⁴. There is an "imagined" world all around us, the world of the market which sees people as commodities and values as defined by demand. What we

need is a “counter-imagination” which gives us a counter-memory, (that humanity originates in the loving purposes of God) and a counter-hope (that our future is bound up in a vision of a world without oppression and hurting) and, in the present, a counter-vocation, to live as if these things were true. That whole counter-world is already found in the Scriptures.

So, if the Church is uniquely that place where people can encounter the biblical story as *their* story, and to find a counter-imagination, how does the Church itself live within the biblical story?

Suppose we were to approach the Bible not as a fund of information or store of morality to be absorbed, but as a story to connect with, a story which places the Church in judgement as well as in hope.

What might such an approach to the text feel like? In *The Bible & Postmodern Imagination*, Brueggemann looks at the story of Exodus 11.1–11 in some detail, for it opens up themes of how we experience stories of faith and justice. The text is Moses’s warning of the final plague to visit Egypt and the Pharaoh’s regime, a death-dealing visit not from natural disaster but from God himself. God will visit Egypt terrifyingly at midnight and take the first-born. Among the Egyptian oppressors there will be loud cries, but not among the Israelites. The Israelites will get their silver and gold back from before the time of slavery, there is no escape for the oppressors, no ill-gotten gains to keep, only the loss of everything Egypt holds dear. Israel will rejoice in its strange gift of freedom and Egyptians will be horror-struck.

For Brueggemann, this dramatic and appalling text “moves against our presumed world” – a world in which we, like the Egyptians, imagine ourselves safe behind our hordes of gold and silver, behind oppressive force, imagining that we will be untouched by the cries of the powerless. A world in which we cannot imagine that God will not be even-handed and give us, the respectable ones, our due reward. Or, enter the story as an Israelite. We think,

as we go to bed, that the next morning is bound to be the same, more bricks to make, more goading to bear. We never dare to imagine a Passover, or that the crying or misery would be anything but our own. Both parties are stunned by the Passover, and the Bible again emerges as something more strange and terrible than we imagined, asserting that things are not too predictable and the status quo may not last past midnight. How are we like the Egyptians? How are we like Israelites? What kind of “celebration” is this Passover? Who is the God who is celebrated? All these sharp questions haunt us, if we will let them.⁵

Brueggemann’s genius is to give us the hermeneutical tools to invert our world in God’s name. What might the Passover story mean to a middle class church, to those who have privilege and can exercise choice in our postmodern world, but are trying to listen to “Moses”, to the voice of the poor – and to those who are not? What might it mean to an inner city or rural church which has exhausted its fund of hope?

If we dare really to use hermeneutics, to interpret Scripture as story with its own dynamic and claim on us all, then we will find resources for a new millennium, dangerous intoxicating resources which can fund our acting in the name of a God who disturbs and empowers us. ■

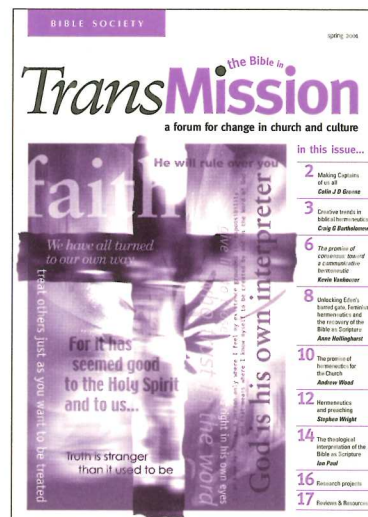
Notes

¹ Paul MacLean & Michael Thompson *Seeking the Seekers: Serving the hidden spiritual quest* (Anglican Book Centre, 2000) particularly their marks of a lively church (p.134–5) which includes being grounded in meaningful worship, expressing human stories, being a place of struggle and celebration, without referring to the Bible.

² J. Richard Middleton & Brian J Walsh *Truth is Stranger Than it Used to Be* (SPCK, 1995)

³ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (University of Chicago Press, 1992) Fifth Study “Personal Identity and Narrative Identity” p.113–168.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (SCM Press 1993) p.20⁵ Brueggemann, p.72–5.



BRITISH & FOREIGN
BIBLE
SOCIETY

We welcome letters, articles and feedback for inclusion in future editions. These may be sent to the Revd Dr Martin Robinson at the address below.

The Bible in TransMission is published three times a year by Bible Society, Stonehill Green, Westlea, SWINDON, SN5 7DG

Telephone 01793 418100

Fax 01793 418118

e-mail info@bfbs.org.uk

Charity Registration number 232759
Incorporated by Royal Charter

ISSN 1460-499x

© Bible Society 2001

President:

The Rt Revd John B Taylor kcvo

Vice Presidents

The Revd Steve Chalke

The Revd Joel Edwards

Professor David F Ford

The Revd Dr Peter Graves

Mr Richard Madeley

The Rt Revd Dr Barry Morgan

Mrs Evelyn Neve

The Most Revd Vincent Nichols

Sir Cliff Richard OBE

Mr Jack Swailes

Professor Hugh Williamson

The Revd Canon Dr Tom Wright

Chief Executive:

Neil Crosbie

Chairman of the Board of Trustees:

Dr Clive Dilloway

Production Editor: **John Lloyd**

Designed by Litchfield Morris 01452 300553