

Theology of Liberation and its gift to Exegesis*

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1 : Finding the biblical world

The future of the theology of liberation is hidden in a cloud of controversy¹. Nevertheless, I have a shrewd suspicion that, whatever the aspirations of the religious authorities might be, we are dealing with an approach to the Bible and a way of Christian discipleship which is so deep-rooted that it will be difficult to dislodge, at least in some areas of Latin America. This is not to suggest that the way ahead for the liberation theologians is going to be an easy one. But the fact is that in a country like Brazil there is an intimate link between this theological approach and the life of the church. The importance of the basic Christian communities in the lives of ordinary Christians and in the work of the theologians of liberation themselves cannot be overestimated. They have provided the framework and the foundation on which its edifice has been built. There may be moves against practitioners of the theology of liberation, but there will still be the setting for that theological reflection. What is more, there are signs that the theological method has been appropriated in certain quarters of North American and European theology. But what most concerns us here is the fact that the theology of liberation is producing distinctive approaches to biblical interpretation which in my view demand a hearing from us.

It is probably fair to say that in the first instance the theology of liberation inherited many of the approaches of North American and European biblical scholarship². It is true that from the start there was a concern to emphasise the importance of the site of reading and interpreting of the exegete and theologian³. Those of us in Europe were asked to examine the impact of our setting and traditions on our exegetical concerns. But initially the treatment of the early Christian sources flowed in fairly traditional channels, albeit with an increased concern for the political dimension of the gospel. There was little that was new in the interpretative methods adopted. Few of the liberation theologians well known in this country would regard themselves as biblical specialists (Jose Porfirio Miranda is an exception)⁴. Consequently in their New Testament exegesis they have tended to take over the methods and many of the conclusions of those biblical

scholars who adopt the historical-critical method, a method of interpretation which dominates the exegesis of our era and which is infrequently subjected to critical scrutiny.

Alongside the emergence of liberation theology there has been a resurgence of interest in the social world of the biblical writers. Such interest, of course, is nothing new. Pioneers like Deissmann⁵ earlier in this century provided a wealth of material, on the basis of which the world of early Christianity could be constructed. What is different about much of the recent enquiry into the social world of the biblical writings is that it has been done with sociological tools. In other words, we have, in addition to the study of social history, sociologies of early Christianity in which a variety of paradigms familiar to the sociologist and social anthropologist have been deliberately and explicitly used to examine Christian origins. Thus we find the theory of cognitive dissonance (i.e. analysis of responses to the failure of beliefs to be fulfilled in experience) being used in the study of the Old Testament prophetic literature by Robert Carroll⁶ and in the study of early Christian literature by John Gager⁷.

I do not know enough about the various interpreters involved in this enterprise to be sure that the emergence of interest in the sociology of the biblical communities initially had any links with the theology of liberation. Nevertheless, as both have developed there has clearly emerged a confluence of interest. We find in a recent collection edited by Norman Gottwald⁸ that contributions from several of the major figures in the discussion of the social world of the biblical communities stands alongside those of feminist biblical exegetes like Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Third World interpreters.

Much of this exegesis still follows fairly conventional patterns, albeit with an explicit concern to spell out the site of reading of the different interpreters. The difference of perspective provokes different concerns, though the interpretation itself still treads ground which would be fairly familiar to us all. Thus in the feminist/liberationist exegesis (manifest particularly in Schüssler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her*)⁹ there is a concern to shed light on the place of women in the earliest Christian communities. But as well as elucidating neglected features of biblical literature, this approach has revealed how much mainstream biblical exegesis has led to an excessive concentration on various types of theological discourse at the expense of the elucidation of the social world and the character of the ethical response. So an outcome of the new approach is a change of interest: away from the theology of the writers to a concern for their social world and practices.

There is in my mind little doubt that these developments have been to the benefit of biblical study. Others better equipped than I am will be able to assess the contribution of Norman Gottwald's massive

*Tribes of Yahweh*¹⁰ to the study of Israelite origins, but, as far as the New Testament is concerned, I have found the discussions of various aspects of early Christianity by Gerd Theissen enlightening¹¹. The contrast between the social setting of the Pauline churches and that of Jesus' followers in rural Palestine has opened up a new basis for understanding the religious and social development of primitive Christianity. Similarly Wayne Meeks' *The First Urban Christians*,¹² while not exactly revolutionising Pauline studies, has sought to ask pertinent questions about the organisation and belief-systems of Paul and his communities.

One of the features of the resurgence of interest in the social world of the early Christians, however, has been the conspicuous lack of an explicitly Marxist interpretation of early Christian literature. There is little doubt that the influence of Marx lurks in the background of some recent writing on the social world of early Christianity, whether it be acknowledged or not, but it is probably fair to say that, apart from the work of Hans Kreissig and Milan Machovec¹³, Kautsky's *Foundations of Christianity* is still a rather lonely, and dated, monument to such an enterprise. In the light of the stimulating work of Geoffrey de Sainte Croix (*The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*)¹⁴ it may well be time to explore such an avenue again.

But there is one significant exception to which I would now like to turn, Fernando Belo's *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark*¹⁵.

2 : *Introducing Belo*

Compared with the reading of most of the books and articles mentioned so far, the reading of Belo's book comes as something of a shock to one who has been schooled in the historical-critical method. Its significance is that it offers an entry into a rather different interpretative world, which has connections with mainstream exegesis and with some of the distinctive exegetical approaches now emerging in Latin America. As such it offers a convenient introduction to types of biblical exegesis influenced by liberation theology. Clearly Belo feels himself to be an outsider, and his hermeneutical approach betrays an idiosyncratic amalgam of interpretative tools which is as daunting as it is thought-provoking¹⁶. He writes from a clear Marxist perspective, in which concern to elucidate the relationship between the ideological superstructure in the religious language and the economic base is an important datum. As far as he is concerned, the gospel of Mark is a product of the social formation of its day, and the text needs to be examined in this light. Belo is not interested in getting behind the text of Mark to ask what really happened either in the life of Jesus or

in the life of the Markan community. His approach is to examine the Gospel as a story which takes place in a particular historical setting and for the proper understanding of which knowledge of the wider setting is important. Belo's analysis proceeds along lines similar to those used in the interpretation of, say, a Dickens novel. Questions of the historicity or otherwise of the events described are ignored, though the wider historical setting of the narrative is explored and explained.

Belo's concern with the social setting is linked to a form of structural analysis of the text which tends to play down the role of the author and his concerns. Nevertheless, Belo's use of interpretative tools is eclectic, and he does not entirely ignore the author and his community (what Belo terms the narrator/readers level). But before I explain the character of Belo's structuralist method, let me say a little more about his treatment of the social setting of the Markan narrative.

Belo's book is in three major parts. The first includes a theoretical discussion of his interpretative method, an examination of the economic, political and ideological setting in first-century Palestine and a discussion of the function of the Torah within Jewish society. The second, and most substantial, part of the book consists of a commentary on the gospel of Mark, in which the complicated method of reading is put into practice. The book concludes with an essay in materialist ecclesiology, in which the main strands of the commentary are brought together and amplified.

In his discussion of the mode of production in biblical Palestine Belo starts off with an examination of the Torah. He makes a distinction between two systems which he can find in the Torah, one based on Leviticus (what he calls the pollution system) and one based on Deuteronomy (the debt system). It is the system found in Deuteronomy which Belo argues is concerned with social equality. The fact that the two systems are found juxtaposed in the Torah is Belo's view indicative of a class conflict in post-exilic Judaism. The Levitical system, centered as it is on the cult and the privileges of the priests, contrasts with the Deuteronomic system, in which is found the old ethic of brotherhood of the nomadic tribes, which promoted social equality¹⁷. In the canon of the OT it is the Levitical system which occupies a more prominent position. That is indicative of the fact that it was the priestly caste which was responsible for the final form of the text of the Torah and thus gave their class power a solid foundation in the sacred text¹⁸. The distinction between the two systems has a prominent role to play in Belo's interpretation of Mark. It is with a radicalised version of the system based on Deuteronomy that Belo considers that Jesus sides, in the narrative of Mark, over against the system which promoted the cult.

In a chapter on Palestine in the first century A.D. Belo considers

the economics, politics and ideology of the area. He suggests that the sub-asiatic mode of production was dominant in Judea and contrasts this with Galilee, which he considers was more intimately linked with the dominant slave-based mode of production of the Roman empire. There is a short discussion of the various political and regional tensions (e.g. Galilee versus Judea and the village versus the city) as well as the importance of the cult-dominated life of Jerusalem and its environs. Belo then turns to what he calls the production in writing, circulation and consumption of texts of the social formation. His major concern in this section is an outline of the biblical books, and in particular the growth of Jewish eschatology, though he does not explore in any depth the reasons for the production of this literature and its relationship to the socio-economic situation he describes. In the ideological field the Temple is singled out as an object of considerable importance. In making this statement he signals that in his view the words of Jesus against the Temple have to take full account of the challenge to the economic as well as the religious life of the Jewish people.

As far as the class struggle in Palestine is concerned, Belo repeats the opinion of many scholars that the economic situation in the first century A.D. provoked the emergence of Zealot-type groups, whose enemies were both the Romans and the priestly aristocracy. The goal of the Zealots, he claims, was not a revolution which would completely abolish the existing economic order but a rebellion which would restore it in its pure form.

As we might have expected, consideration of the economic and social setting of the narrative is an important component of Belo's reading, but it is not sufficient for him to embark immediately on an interpretation of the text without further reflection on the question: how is Mark to be read? Belo refuses to follow the path of mainstream NT exegesis, whether it be redaction criticism and its concern with the relationship of the various parts of the narrative to the needs of the community for which it was written, or the historical Jesus approach which ascribes the words and events to the situation in Jesus' ministry. As we have seen, a concern for the general historical setting of the story is of central importance for Belo's approach. Indeed, he would not want to exclude the possibility that some parts of the text are best understood as evidence of what he calls the 'narrator/readers level', by which he means the traditional concerns of the redaction critics. But it is clear that, unlike most exegetes, the intention of the author is rejected as a single overriding interpretative key. Belo prefers to follow the pattern of reading suggested by Barthes, particularly in the latter's textual analysis of the Balzac story *Sarrasine*. Belo sets out an elaborate system of reading based on the different types of textual material. In his view the text is a complex, in which different types of

textual material are juxtaposed and play differing functions within the narrative as a whole. The interpretative method is rather elaborate. A number of textual functions, which Belo calls codes, act as signals to the reader to read the narrative in particular ways.

When summarised, Belo's reading of the gospel of Mark seems very strange, because it plays down what has been dominant in most study of Mark, the Cross. The conclusion of Belo's reading is that the strategy of Jesus as set out in the narrative was to proclaim the kingdom and by his mighty deeds to convince disciples that he was the Messiah. After the recognition of his messiahship by Peter, Jesus' strategy alters, firstly to an articulation of his messiahship over against the view of the Zealots, and secondly to a journey to Jerusalem as a prelude to the extension of his message to the pagan world, and his consequent absence from the circle of his disciples. In the process of the narrative Jesus' subversion of the symbolic order, particularly of the system based on Leviticus, is stressed. Thus, for example, Jesus touches a leper, and far from becoming unclean himself, he cures the leper (Mk.1. 40ff). In the early part of the narrative there is gradually articulated a division between Jesus and the disciples on the one hand and the crowds on the other. Jesus' strategy is to avoid the towns, centres of both the crowds and the authorities, and, when he cannot escape them, to create a space for himself and his disciples. The problem with the crowds is that their understanding of messianism is dominated totally by the Zealot strategy, which seeks to find a military leader to fight the Romans, and into which mould they seek to fit Jesus. The orders given to the people who have been cured to remain silent have as their function prevention of the precipitation of a messianic movement of a Zealot type; and the same is also true of the silencing of the demons.

Contrary to what one might expect, Belo argues that a part of the gospel is dedicated to the articulation of an alternative strategy of Jesus over against the Zealots. Jesus' strategy is more radical, in that it challenges the centrality of the Temple in the economic and religious life of Israel. He also repudiates the means whereby the Zealots sought to implement their strategy, namely armed revolt against Rome. Belo notes the way in which Jesus seeks to escape from the crowds, and, in the last days in Jerusalem, seeks refuge away from the city (e.g. 11. 11ff)⁹. According to Belo he does this to escape death and so pursue his mission to the pagans. In his absence the practice of the disciples will no longer be focussed on the body of Jesus but on the practice of sharing bread.

Belo argues that Jesus did not go up to Jerusalem to die, though he was aware of the possibility of death. He came to Jerusalem to preach in the Temple, to proclaim that the vineyard would be given to others and to begin his exodus to the pagans. It is only the transfer of

Judas back from the circle of Jesus to the circle of the dominant class which enables the authorities to put an end to the strategies of Jesus. Jesus is engaged in a radical subversion of the codes of society. He challenges the current conception of the family, the centrality of the Temple and the hegemony of the priests, current conceptions of messiahship and wealth, and he rejects the master/servant relationship. In Belo's view Jesus' message as found in this narrative is non-violent communism. He suggests that there was only one way in which Jesus' non-revolutionary communism could have been extended in a situation where the Roman economic and political system was so powerful, other than by marginalisation like the Essenes, and that was by means of opening up the gospel to other nations; hence the exodus to the pagans. The resurrection narrative indicates that the narrative of Jesus did not end with his death, but started up again: the mission to the pagans was renewed by way of Galilee.

As the narrative unfolds, the ability to understand the strategy of Jesus not only as a messianic practice but also as one which had to be distinguished from the Zealots is a matter of importance. In this parables play an important role. The parable of the Sower, for example, offers a way of understanding the narrative of Jesus. Belo contrasts the first soil, where the hearers—by being linked with Satan—are Jesus' adversaries, and the last soil, which refers to those who break completely with the prevailing system and transfer into the kingdom.²⁰ It is of central importance, if the transference is to be made, that a conversion takes place. The problem with the authorities is that their presuppositions prevent them from understanding the true character of Jesus' mission. Indeed, eventually they understand Jesus' deeds not as a messianic practice but as one diametrically opposed to the ways of God, a way of violence which threatens the entire economic, political and ideological system upon which their power is based.

A major feature of Belo's interpretation is his view that in the gospel of Mark we have the juxtaposition of what he calls the messianic narrative, based on the miracles and the radical teaching, and a theological discourse, which permeates the second half of the narrative and explains the necessity for Jesus' death. He contrasts the two by giving them the labels pre- and post-paschal discourse. As is evident from these labels, the pre-paschal narrative is not dominated by the cross and the divine necessity of Jesus' suffering, whereas the post-paschal discourse is shot through with an understanding of Jesus' death as predestined. In a rather complicated discussion Belo argues that in the text of Mark's gospel the post-paschal elements have erased features of the messianic narrative, though he thinks that its full character can be restored. He stresses that the restoration of the pre-

paschal text is not restoration of something originally in a source available to the evangelist. He considers that the narrator erased elements of the pre-paschal narrative in the very process of writing. In so doing the narrator changed the execution of Jesus by the authorities, which originally was devoid of any doctrinal significance, into a death with profound theological meaning²¹. Thus the narrator gave the messianic/post-paschal narrative a significant push in the direction of the dominance of the theological discourse. This is a first step on the road to Christianity, in which, according to Belo, the ideological instance is dominant. The reason for this development he traces to the political powerlessness of the emerging Christian communities in the face of the all-powerful Roman economic system. Charity as a practice, argues Belo, will soon become simply a consequence of ideology. This stands in direct contrast to what Belo believes is the major thrust of the Markan messianic narrative: the practice of power in relation to the bodies of those afflicted with uncleanness; the practice of teaching, i.e. of reading the practice of power; the practice of subversion of the Israelite symbolic field and a strategy for dealing with the crowds and the authorities²². The messianic practice, in Belo's words, is a process of transforming a given raw material (economic, political and ideological relations) into a product (a new ecclesial relation in the circle of the disciples), a transformation which is effected by human labour²³. This is a splendidly provocative sentence which raises a host of interpretative and critical questions. According to Belo the messianic practice of Jesus represents a radicalisation of the system based on Deuteronomy and the prophets and a rejection of the system based on Leviticus. In this emphasis on the practice of Jesus and the detection of the shift towards the primacy of the ideological in the account of Jesus' life one can detect a distinctive emphasis of the theology of liberation applied to a particular problem in the Markan narrative.

A summary can hardly do justice to the complexity and wide-ranging character of the reading of Mark offered by Belo. For one thing, such an attempt to summarise makes the various interpretations seem wildly improbable. Indeed, I would not want to pretend that I found the whole edifice convincing, and in detail the analysis can be faulted at several places. The pre-occupation with the sub-asiatic mode of production has been criticised²⁴, and many biblical scholars will take exception to Belo's polarisation of the Levitical and Deuteronomistic systems. The conflict between the messianic narrative and the theological discourse may at first seem far-fetched, though it has to be said that Belo is merely putting a new gloss on a disjunction in the Markan narrative which has for a long time fascinated interpreters. In speaking about the messianic narrative and the theological discourse which he believes partly displaced it he is only

using alternative terminology to discuss a long-familiar feature: the change of tone after Peter's confession. While there has been a tendency in recent scholarship to concentrate on what Belo calls the theological discourse as the heart of the evangelist's message, Belo wants to rehabilitate the central place of the first part of the narrative and so attempt to do justice to the proclamation and practice of the kingdom within the story as a whole. But to relegate the material about suffering merely to a theological discourse which is at odds with the first part of the narrative seems to me to be unnecessary.

Firstly, while it can be said that there are elements in the theological discourse in which the seeds of a developing interest in the significance of Jesus' death as a primary element of what constitutes the messianic circle are to be found, it is not apparent that this discourse necessarily undermines entirely the messianic narrative. Secondly, as Belo points out, there are two economic fields which impinge on the Markan narrative: the Jewish and the Roman. The main thrust of the words and deeds of Jesus concerned the Jewish economic system, centred in Judea on the Temple (though there may also have been a rejection of the Roman slave-based system in Mk. 12. 13ff, if aspects of Belo's reading are correct). But overarching the Jewish system was the big Roman system. While there may have been a slight possibility of changing the balance in favour of the 'Deuteronomic' and against the prominence of the Temple, the extension of such a change outside Palestine would have to contend with the dominant Roman system. While it would be wrong to suggest that the emphasis on suffering in the second half of the gospel indicates acceptance of that system, it could be argued that in terms of the strategy of the kingdom as set out in the Markan narrative there had to be acceptance that any challenge of it, even if it be non-violent, would involve suffering and death. This is in fact to take up a point made towards the end of Belo's study, where he suggests that the resort to the theological discourse took place precisely because of the powerlessness of the Christian within the Roman empire. Even if this theory be discounted, it is surely part of the messianic practice as set out in Mark to accept the division and hostility which emerges from the proclamation and practice of the kingdom. According to Belo's own reading Jesus reflects throughout the gospel on the consequences of his practice. As the story unfolds, that reflection inexorably points towards the acceptance of death and martyrdom. Thus within the narrative of the messianic practice there exists the soil in which the later 'theological discourse' could develop, where the focus of attention switches from a narrative of practice to discussion about ideas. So whatever impetus there may have been to elaborate the theological discourse, it must be questioned whether its presence in the gospel is quite as much at odds with the messianic narrative as Belo

supposes.

What, however, is surely the most common criticism of the book is that both Marx and structuralism are being allowed to contaminate the interpretation of biblical texts. I suspect that even those of us who do not react negatively to Belo's use of Markan tools will want to question how far unadulterated Marx can really be helpful in interpreting the biblical narrative without ending up with a gross distortion of the text. I suspect that Belo himself may recognise this, as it is interesting that his discussion of the resurrection would be totally unacceptable to orthodox Marxists and in fact is more akin to an outlook influenced by Ernst Bloch.

Yet, with all its blemishes, I would echo the comment of Robin Scroggs, who stated unequivocally: 'Belo needs a hearing'. It seems to me that what is most important about this book is not the specific results of the interpretation so much as the suggestive character of the method adopted. Thus the interplay of different textual functions within the narrative and the contrast between the strategies of the various actors suggest new possibilities in discussion of the gospel. Belo's interpretative method, eclectic as it is, shows the way in which a wide range of tools can be used, without there being any feeling that by opting for a form of structural interpretation all concern with the historical context is abandoned.

3 : Ideological superstructure and economic base

Why should we use the theory of a nineteenth-century atheist to interpret a first century theological text? I am not sure that I can offer an easy answer to that question. But I would like to make two comments in connection with it. First of all, it seems to me that the emerging interest in the social world of the New Testament, particularly the relationship between the development of ideas and their social formation, owes a debt to the Marxist tradition which is not always acknowledged. In my view, the fact that Belo makes a clean breast of his Marxist presuppositions should not make us suppose that the influence of Marx is absent in at least an indirect form in other sociological approaches to biblical literature. Secondly, it is incumbent upon all of us engaged in biblical interpretation to engage more readily than we are prepared to in an analysis of the theoretical basis of our interpretations, however widely practised a particular interpretative method may be. That is one thing that Belo's book has compelled me to examine.

Of course, one of the great difficulties confronting not only the Marxian approach to early Christian literature but also the renewed interest in the social world of the New Testament is that we do not

possess sufficient information about the specific social formations in which particular texts were written. Indeed, we are really in no position to write a reliable social and economic history of first-century Palestine. Those who have tried to do so have had to rely upon isolated pieces of evidence in order to draw far-reaching conclusions about particular areas and periods. For example, the contrast between the situation in Galilee as compared with Judea is clearly important; and yet the information we have at our disposal upon which we can base our assessment of first-century Galilee is extremely limited. When we add to this the fact that we know so little about the specific circumstances in which the extant literary works originated, it will be seen that the material for relating literature and its content to its social formation is meagre. Some would probably have us accept the severe limitations placed upon us by the evidence and resist the temptation to speculate about the relationship between the ideological superstructure and the economic base. While accepting the force of the arguments of those who are reluctant to move beyond the limits placed upon them by the evidence, I would hope that, assuming such approaches to the biblical literature are taken further, we may move towards a position in which we can examine the relationship between the ideological plane and the underlying social formation. Some New Testament exegetes have been willing to accept a link between the ideas and the social formation, though they have tended to ignore wider economic and political considerations, not to mention the possible contribution of a class struggle to the formation of the text. The work of Belo has reminded us that a complete indebtedness to the insight of Marx will involve testing the hypothesis that the textual product may itself manifest the contradictions of the class struggle.

There is in my view room for a contribution from a Marxist-influenced literary criticism, which takes seriously the social setting and specifically the economic struggles as a potent force in the origin and development of religious ideas, though I would want to add that I myself could not accept the Marxist interpretative edifice without important qualifications. In stressing the contribution that such an approach may make we must not be guilty of supposing a simple and direct connection between the economic base and the ideological superstructure, what Geoffrey de Sainte Croix has aptly called 'making leaves grow on roots'. The form and content of all literature have a degree of autonomy which cannot be completely explained by reference to the social formation. In considering the literary products of first-century Judaism, the dominance and the influence of the Scriptures, whatever the conflicts which led to their production and canonisation, make it difficult to suppose that naive Marxist interpretations can adequately explain ideas. The peculiarities of the Jewish religion and the specific character of its religious tradition

must not be ignored. We must not underestimate the influence of the ideas themselves on the emergence of the social formation itself²⁵.

We saw reason to question whether there is such a fundamental contradiction between the whole of what Belo calls the theological discourse and the messianic narrative. It seems to me, however, that in posing the question of the relationship between the messianic narrative and the theological discourse Belo has laid before us an issue of some importance for the discussion of christology. I think that it is probably fair to say that the christology of the New Testament has concentrated almost exclusively on the questions: who was Jesus,—and how did the first Christians express and develop their convictions about him? The relationship between christology and the community's self-understanding becomes so attenuated that christology becomes a series of statements whose relationship to the human existence of the writers and readers is not always apparent. For a writer like Paul the experience of the Spirit in the believer and the convictions about the person of Christ are closely related, and it would be unwise to suppose that christological convictions can and should be separated from the understanding of the impact of the social world on the disciple and the character of his response.

Few would want to assert that to be a Christian consisted either solely or principally in maintaining the validity of a particular collection of beliefs, but in writing about early Christianity we frequently give the impression that what is most important in discussing the early church is the relationship between ideas and the development of ideas without necessarily examining the relationship between those ideas and the social matrix in which they were formulated.

An important step in the direction of redressing the balance was taken by Wayne Meeks in what I consider to be a significant contribution to our understanding of christology and its relationship to its social world, his article 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism'²⁶. In this article Meeks concentrates on the pattern of descent/ascent of the heavenly Christ. It is not his concern to establish the relationship of this pattern either to Jewish or gnostic material (though he does conclude that it is at least plausible that Johannine christology helped to create some of the gnostic myths). Rather, his concern is to explain the function of the mythical pattern within the Fourth Gospel. In particular he wants to investigate the dialectic between the symbolic world of the Johannine community and the group's historical experience. This dialectic, he argues, served both to explain that experience and to motivate and form the reaction of group members to that experience. The pattern of descent/ascent, Meek argues, depicts Jesus as the Stranger from Heaven. He states:

So long as we approach the Johannine literature as a

chapter in the history of ideas, it will defy our understanding...the reader cannot understand any part of the Fourth Gospel until he understands the whole.... The book functions for its readers in precisely the same way that the epiphany of its hero functions, within its narratives and dialogues.

The book is seen by Meeks as an aetiology of the Johannine group. In telling the story of the Son of Man who came down from heaven and then ascended after choosing a few of his own out of the world, the book defines and vindicates the existence of the community that saw itself as unique, alien from its world, under attack, misunderstood, but living in unity with Christ and through him with God. The symbolic universe was not only the reflection or projection of the group's social situation. The christological claims of the Johannine Christians resulted in their becoming alienated and finally expelled from the synagogue, but that alienation was in turn explained by the further developments of christological motifs, which in turn drove the group into further isolation²⁷. It was a case of continual, harmonic reinforcement of real experience and ideology.

Even if you cannot go the whole way with Meeks in his analysis of this particular theme, it has to be admitted that he has put his finger on the relationship between ideas and their social formation which could bear fruit in the study of christology.

As has been noted, there is a great danger in rushing to simplistic conclusions on the basis of such treatment of the emerging doctrine of early Christianity. Nevertheless it seems to me that the study of christology, of soteriology and of ecclesiology need to explore how far its function on what de Ste. Croix terms 'the ideological plane' can help us illuminate particular aspects of the social setting of early Christian groups. I would have thought that the emergence of developed christology ought to be considered in this light. It is a well-known fact that during the first century AD early Christian use of the title Messiah underwent quite a profound change, so that within a very short time the term was being used virtually as a proper name with little or no relic of its messianic significance. While it may be true that in the Fourth Gospel the title Messiah still retains some of its original Jewish eschatological significance, its importance has receded, compared with titles like the Son of Man, the Son of God, the descent/ascent formula and the sending formula. The reason for the eclipse of the messianic title used of the eschatological role of Jesus is a phenomenon which certainly deserves to be considered in the light of the socio-economic situation and practice of emerging Christianity. In the past it has been easy to explain the retreat from messianism and eschatology in purely religious terms e.g. compensation for the delay of the Parousia. In future I suspect that we shall want to take more

seriously the relationship between such ideological shifts and the developing pattern of the life of the Christian church. While it would be naive to suppose that the shift from rural Palestine to the urban Hellenistic world was entirely responsible, the character of the Christian response appropriate, indeed possible, within the latter may well have affected the form of the developing Christian confession.

Some studies of emerging Jewish eschatology have not ignored the link between the development of ideas and the social setting. Thus, for example, Otto Plöger²⁸ has argued that in post-exilic Judaism there was a conflict between a priestly group and a group whose views can be found in some prophetic texts; the former being content to see the fulfilment of the prophetic hope in the restored Temple, where the latter still looked forward to the fulfilment of the prophetic promises. More recently P.D. Hanson has argued that a particular form of the eschatological hope has its origins in the struggles that were going on in the post-exilic community²⁹. What is clearly stressed here is the importance of the social matrix for understanding the development and conflict of ideas. Hanson believes that it is possible to trace a development in the use of mythological language from Deutero-Isaiah, where it is used to speak of actual historical events, to Trito-Isaiah, where it is used literally of God's actual irruption into the present state of affairs to establish a new heaven and a new earth. He believes that this change took place because of the marginalisation of visionary groups in the Isaianic tradition and the emerging hegemony of the priestly group supported as they were by Ezekiel's vision. With this marginalisation there was a progressive despair that the hopes for Israel could be fulfilled while society was ordered as it was, and consequently there was a need to retreat into another world as the only appropriate arena for the fulfilment of divine promises.

This is an extremely suggestive thesis. While I am not convinced that Hanson has solved the problem of apocalyptic origins, I do think that he has offered an intriguing reconstruction of the post-exilic period, but it may well be possible to go further. As we have seen, Belo has reminded us that this was the period when the Torah was receiving its final formation and was emerging as the definitive authority within Israelite life, probably at the expense of the prophetic vision. The cultic dominance of the Torah and the economic consequences of that for the priestly groups is clearly of some importance both for the population at large and for those whose vision of society neither focussed on the Temple nor accepted the economic consequences of that particular settlement.

4 : Beyond the historical-critical method

One issue which Belo's materialist reading has thrown into the
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sharpest possible relief is the way in which the historical-critical method has dominated the reading of biblical texts in the last century. There are many reasons for this, all of which should be a matter for reflection and acknowledgement by all practitioners of this method. I suspect that the factor which impels this type of reading is the belief that it can get at the original meaning of the text, which will then exercise control on the readings of the text and thus limit the role of the text in wider interpretative questions. Whatever may have been the conscious intention of the author (assuming that we are in a position to ascertain this, at least in general terms), what a Marxist-inspired reading of the Bible compels us to do (and not only this reading, of course) is to reckon with the possibility that in addition to the conscious intention of the author we may be in a position to explore other levels of meaning, specifically those dealing with the socio-economic setting of the text. Thus while in a particular instance the conscious or manifest concern of the author may have been a religious issue, the socio-economic concerns which may have been largely unacknowledged by the author may show through and be of as much importance to us. In saying this I would accept that we are imposing a particular world-view on our text, which may well have serious shortcomings and which may be subject to considerable refinement and expansion before it can function adequately as an interpretative key within Christian discourse. It does remind us that we need not always be pre-occupied with the author's conscious intention as the sole determinative concern in our reading. In addition, we should be more concerned to lay bare those complex constructions which we as readers bring to the text, whether as part of an academic or ecclesiastical environment or, as Belo and the theologians of liberation would have us remember, as part of a First-World culture.

Approaches such as Belo's have opened up for me the obligation to look critically at the mainstream practice of biblical interpretation. There is no doubt that liberation theologians sometimes suggest that the conventional ways of reading the Bible in academic circles are deficient and do not take sufficient account of the site of the reading. While liberation theologians are quick to acknowledge their own presuppositions, one sometimes feels that their method, which does justice to the social world of text and reader, is to be preferred to any other. However, is there enough evidence to suggest that the liberationist reading of biblical texts can demonstrate that the Bible is the literary memory of the poor? This, in my view, is an inadequate assessment of the diversity of the biblical material. The liberationist reading cannot be elevated without further ado to the place of a normative reading, though that is not to exclude the possibility that a hermeneutic could be developed which might in fact do that; that, I hope, can be done, but it is still to come. What is clear is that

liberationist exegesis has placed a question-mark against a hermeneutic based on a naive acceptance of the historical-critical method both with regard to its narrow concern with a normative overriding meaning of the text and its neglect of the cultural base of the early Christian theological discourse.

CITATIONS

- 1 Cf. notably the Vatican document "Instruction on certain aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'" issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Rome, September 1984.
 - 2 See e.g. J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Cross Roads*; L. Boff, *Jesus Christ, Liberator*.
 - 3 See further Juan L. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*.
 - 4 Jose P. Miranda, *Marx and the Bible*.
 - 5 E.g. *New Light on the Ancient Near East*.
 - 6 *When Prophecy Failed*.
 - 7 *Kingdom and Community*.
 - 8 *The Bible and Liberation*.
 - 9 London, 1983.
 - 10 London.
 - 11 E.g. *The First Followers of Jesus; The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*.
 - 12 New Haven, 1983.
 - 13 *A Marxist Looks at Jesus*.
 - 14 London, 1981.
 - 15 *Lecture Matérialiste de l'Évangile de Marc*, Paris, Cerf, 1974 (see review by F. Kerr in *New Blackfriars* Vol 57 (1976) pp. 234—6); ET *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark*, New York, Maryknoll, 1981.
 - 16 Cf. a similar thesis to that of Belo in G. Pixley, *God's Kingdom*.
 - 17 Op. cit. pp. 44, 56.
 - 18 pp. 55ff.
 - 19 p. 247.
 - 20 p. 259.
 - 21 p. 280.
 - 22 p. 127.
 - 23 p. 253.
 - 24 See de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* pp. 157ff.
 - 25 Cf. N. Lash, *Matter of Hope*, p. 120.
 - 26 JBL 91.
 - 27 This issue is explored by T. Radcliffe in "'My Lord and my God': the locus of confession", *New Blackfriars* Vol 65 (1984) pp. 52—62.
 - 28 *Theocracy and Eschatology*, Oxford.
 - 29 *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, Philadelphia.
- * This is a slightly revised version of the paper 'New Directions in New Testament Study : The Theology of Liberation and its contribution to Biblical Exegesis', delivered to the Lightfoot Society of the University of Durham in May 1984.