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Contents

God's lethal weapon (Hebrews 4:11–13)

Andrew T Lincoln

God's Word and man's myths

C René Padilla

Comparative methods and the patriarchal narratives

Martin J Selman

The forensic character of justification

Ronald Y K Fung

Review of Theological Journals, 1976

Book Reviews

God's lethal weapon (Hebrews 4: 11-13)

Andrew T Lincoln

Dr Lincoln is Assistant Professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, Massachusetts. This article, originally given as an address in the Seminary chapel, continues our occasional series of expository studies. At the same time, because of shortage of space, it takes the place of an editorial in this issue.

Most of you are aware or will become increasingly aware of the problems that come to theological students because of their close contact with the Bible. It's not simply that such contact means you begin to take the Bible for granted, but that the nature of your close contact makes it a positive hazard. So much of the time you are using the Bible for a variety of purposes. You have to deal with it in terms of solving exegetical problems or discovering historical settings, or you employ it as a quarry for theological formulations, or you use it in counselling or in ministering in your field education assignments. You are all the time trying to master the Bible for particular purposes, and it's not long before you discover that if that is all that is happening in your contact with the Word, the experience turns sour on you. You meet other Christians who know you're at seminary or studying theology and they say, 'Hey, how fantastic, what a privilege to study God's Word all the time like that!' But when you have a Greek or Hebrew examination the next day, and you're struggling with the exegesis of a verse that has at least six possible interpretations, and your church history course has just made you depressed about the mess some sections of the church made in interpreting Scripture and applying it to a particular issue, and you're having all sorts of problems about the relativity of the interpretation of the Bible in general, then you find it rather difficult to respond enthusiastically to such people with a 'Praise the Lord, isn't it wonderful?' And if, as may well be the case, you're going through one of those periods when because of such problems the Bible has even become a closed book devotionally to you, you not only find it difficult to rejoice at your privilege, but you feel downright guilty—'Here am I with all this contact with the Word but I'm not receiving anything spiritually beneficial from it.' You begin also

to envy those whom you may be tempted to think of as more naïve brothers and sisters who have not been exposed to all the questions that you have and for whom the Bible can remain living and fresh. At times then it becomes a real question whether study of the Bible is a privilege or a hazard.

The writer to the Hebrews saw that contact with the Word could be both a privilege and a hazard. To this writer his Bible, the Old Testament, was a living Word. Hebrews 4: 12—'For the word of God is living and active.' In the context that clearly refers to the written Word, to Psalm 95, which has been under discussion and which the writer introduced in 3: 7 with the words, 'Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says. . . .' To this writer Psalm 95 was God the Holy Spirit speaking and it was a living Word as he read it in the light of its fulfilment, in the light of God's final Word, of what had happened in Christ's death and exaltation. He read it in that light but nevertheless it was the written Word, his Bible, that he describes as living and active.

Because it is living for him, he can use it to speak to his readers and can apply it to their situation. He wants them to see the seriousness of contact with this Word. He exhorts them in 4: 11—'Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, that no one *fall* by the same sort of disobedience.' He wants them to avoid what had happened to Israel when through unbelief the bodies of those who sinned *fell* in the wilderness (3: 17). 'For the word of God is living and active.' Words can do things. On a good day just two words from me can turn the chaos of our children's playroom into order. But not only can words command, they can excite, make a person cry or laugh, pronounce two people to be man and wife or even start a war. Words can accomplish a tremendous amount. How much more God's Word! It's something that will not remain neutral in your contact with it. It will act, it will accomplish what God wants and will have an effect whether you like it or not. It will result either in blessing or judgment for you. But either way it has an effect. The writer has just shown that God's word of oath, 'As I *swore* in my wrath, they shall never enter my rest', had a definite effect and was fulfilled. The generation to whom it had originally been addressed

fell in the wilderness. In fact, says the writer in 4: 2, that Word had first come as promise, as good news, but it did not result in blessing. Why not? Because it did not meet with faith in the hearers. Israel did not respond in the right way. They were not free to pick and choose from God's Word whatever struck their fancy nor simply to treasure it as the divine oracles. Rather it came to them as God's authoritative Word for their lives. They were to hear, believe and obey, and any other response invited God's Word to become his sword of judgment. This is what the writer fears may happen in the case of *his* readers. 'For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.' But why a two-edged sword? The allusion is again to the wilderness generation and to Numbers 14: 43 where as a result of God's oath the wilderness generation fell by the *sword*. But these readers who have heard God's Word as it is fulfilled in his Son are confronted by that which is far more fearful, they face a far more lethal weapon. God's Word is sharper than any two-edged sword, sharp enough to carve apart soul and spirit, joints and marrow. To have such close contact with the Bible may be even more of a hazard than you imagined. You are in contact with what can become a lethal weapon and like all such weapons it needs to be handled with immense care and utmost awareness of what you are doing. It involves the deadly word of judgment of the One with whom we have to do (4: 13), to whom we have to give account. In his sight no creature is hidden. All are open and laid bare. The two words involved are translated literally as 'naked' and 'pinned by the throat'. The latter term is connected either with bending back the sacrificial victim's neck ready for the fatal stroke of the knife or with the grip of the victorious wrestler as he pins his opponent by the throat signalling his defeat. In either case we see man's plight when face to face with his Creator. All cover-ups will be stripped away and his pretensions will avail him nothing as he is pinned by the throat in a state of utter powerlessness.

The writer's point, however, is that before events ever reach such a stage, you must allow the Word to do its work now, its work of 'discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart' (4: 12). The emphasis is on the heart because this is where the wilderness generation had begun to go wrong—'Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion' (3: 8); 'They always go astray in their hearts' (3: 10)—and the Jewish Christian readers must be on

the alert lest apostasy begin in their hearts. 'Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God' (3: 12). Let God's Word sift out the first traces of any such unbelief and hardening and deal with them before it is too late.

A seminary or college community is big enough to make it fairly easy to remain somewhat anonymous if you so wish. You can wear various theological and spiritual masks, and others don't really know your heart. You can be a student in the seminary, sitting in exegesis and theology classes, training for ministry, with unbelief creeping into your heart and the deceitfulness of sin making inroads into your life. Allow the Bible to begin to do its work in your life, ripping away that image you have built up for yourself, that mask you wear before other people, and let it begin to pin you naked and squirming because some of the sickening evil of sin and unbelief in your life is being exposed. Come to the Bible not only to be moulded by its propositions but to be shaken by its questions. Do you ever allow it to call you into question in a disruptive and disturbing way? 'Yes, but how can I?' says someone, 'I feel I need to exegete all the Greek or the Hebrew and read at least three commentaries before I can hear what a passage is saying.' Resist that feeling with all that you have. It's the temptation of wanting to be able to pin it all down thoroughly and rationally and to master it. But God's Word is bigger than that. The temptation can also come not just in terms of the intellect but in terms of devotional use when we are expecting passages to trigger off certain spiritual experiences. Don't attempt to box the Word in like that; it's too big for you to cut it down to your size. Instead, just keep reading, even when you don't understand all the nuances. Keep reading regularly, even when there are no particular spiritual responses. You will be stocking up your memory with Scripture, and gradually, and now and again, you will find the Spirit taking some of those passages, passages that have not already been forced into service for your exegesis, theology or ministry and also some that have, and using them to surprise you, to call some of your own categories into question. In this way you will get the sort of exposure to the Bible that enables you to come not to master it but to be mastered by it, not to judge and criticize it but to let it judge and criticize you. By itself the privilege of close contact with God's Word is no guarantee of blessing; what is needed is a continuous exposure of the heart to it and a continuous response of faith.

There's also a communal aspect to this matter. As we have seen, when the Old Testament text came

alive in a new situation for the writer to the Hebrews, he exhorted his community. As the Word lives for you, don't hoard it up, don't save it for field education assignments, for preaching clinic or ministry on Sundays. Because of the tendency of our hearts to unbelief, the writer to the Hebrews saw the need for the community to 'exhort one another *every day*, as long as it is called "today" that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin' (3: 13). Because sin is so deceitful we all, faculty and students, need exhortation; no-one can sit back securely. The Lord may want you to speak the Word to someone in your community that will help them to avoid eventually having to face God's Word in its lethal capacity as the sword of judgment. Don't say, 'It's none of my business,' when you see someone beginning to slide, when you see unbelief or disobedience—it *is* your business because it can affect the whole community. It is Hebrews that talks about that root of bitterness in the heart springing up and by it many becoming defiled (12: 15). Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life together* says what needs to be said, 'Where defection from God's Word in doctrine or life

imperils the family fellowship and with it the whole congregation, the word of admonition and rebuke must be ventured. Nothing can be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to his sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that calls a brother back from the path of sin. It is a ministry of mercy . . . when we allow nothing but God's Word to stand between us, judging and succouring.'

In a sinful world God's Word, in whatever way it comes to you, whether you interact with it by yourself or whether it is brought to you by another, can be painful. The Bible can be a painful book. Yet the sword of God's Word uncovers your sin in order to point you to the One who bore God's sword of judgment against sin, to the One whose sprinkled blood *speaks* more graciously than the blood of Abel and who has been exalted to heaven as your merciful high priest. To experience the Bible working in your life in this way is to become someone who knows genuinely and from the heart what the writer to the Hebrews is talking about when in 6: 5 he speaks of tasting the *goodness* of the Word of God.

God's Word and man's myths

C René Padilla

Dr Padilla, our associate editor with special responsibility for social ethics, is well known as a speaker at international conferences, with a penchant for disturbing the equilibrium of complacent Christians from the affluent parts of the world. This article, while addressed specifically to North America, will be found to have a much wider application.

If Christian preaching is often regarded as obsolete, the solution is not to adapt the message to the mood of the day, but to let preaching be moulded by the Word of God. It is at this point that preachers for whom relevance is the most basic consideration in preaching are frequently mistaken—they fail to see the link between relevance in preaching and faithfulness to the gospel. It is only in the degree in which preaching is allowed to be an instrument of

God's Word that men and women can receive it as a word from beyond breaking into the human situation and acting with saving power. There is nothing more irrelevant than a message that simply mirrors man's myths and ideologies!

To be sure, the gospel has to be expressed in the terms and thought-forms of the people to whom it is addressed and by whom it must be lived. Indeed, faithfulness itself demands that the gospel be 'contextualized', even as 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth' (Jn. 1: 14). Helmut Thielicke has illustrated the importance of a general accommodation of the gospel to the concrete historical situation by pointing out that if at a mass meeting held at the Berlin Sportspalast under the Nazi regime a speaker had attacked Christianity and someone had leaped to his feet and

shouted, 'Christ is the Messiah!', people would have just looked up with some astonishment. But if someone else had shouted, 'Jesus Christ is the Lord, and all who make themselves into gods by their own power will go to hell along with the pseudo-saviour Adolf Hitler,' he would have probably been torn to pieces by the crowd.¹

The real problem of preaching is how to be faithful to the Word of God and relevant to human life *now*—both at the same time—in other words, how to be *in* the world but not to be *of* this world. Whenever preaching attempts to be relevant by conforming to the world, it has no more relevance than a mere rhetorical exercise. On the other hand, whenever preaching attempts to be faithful to the Word of God by simply repeating seemingly biblical concepts, it is a far cry from the Word that became flesh. The only way for preaching to be relevant is by being faithful to the Word of God; and the only way for it to be faithful is by being relevant to life in the world today.

Faithful and relevant preaching is preaching that projects the Word of God into the contemporary world and places men and women under God's judgment and mercy. It is preaching that, like the prophetic word of old, is sent to nations and kingdoms 'to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant' (Je. 1: 10). It is preaching geared not to please men, but to please God who tests the preacher's heart (1 Thes. 2: 4).

Faithful and relevant preaching today cannot, for the sake of pleasing men, take flight from a world where materialism is making human life increasingly meaningless. Whether embodied in the myth of economic growth or in the myth of revolution, materialism is leading humanity to destruction. It can be seen in its true colours only as it is placed under the Word of God. This is the purpose of the present paper. In the first section I will concentrate on the historical context in which man's myths operate today. In the second and third sections I will examine the two myths and attempt to show why, from a Christian perspective, they must be rejected. Finally, in the fourth section I will propose that, in contrast with man's myths which lead to destruction, God's Word is God's power at work to create a new humanity in the midst of a world whose whole frame is 'passing away' (1 Cor. 7: 31).

The world situation today

If Christians in America are to see clearly what the prophetic priorities of discipleship are at this

moment of history they need to realize (1) that they belong to a nation that with 5.6% of the world's population, controls over 40% of the world's wealth; (2) that the breach between the developed nations and the underdeveloped continues to grow in such a way that it is calculated that by the end of this century the former will be eighteen times richer than the latter; (3) that the increasing disparity between rich and poor nations is not merely an economic and political problem, but an ethical one.

1. One of the most explosive factors of the world crisis today is the intolerable division of humanity between a small wealthy minority in the developed countries and a poor majority in the underdeveloped. A few facts and figures will be enough to illustrate the point. (i) Cattle in the United States consume annually a quantity of cereal grains equivalent to that consumed by the total population of India and China together. It is estimated that each American consumes and pollutes the environment in the same proportion as twenty-five Indians, which makes the United States population, from the point of view of its 'destruction' of natural resources, equivalent to five billion Indians. According to E. F. Schumacher, 'If the "poor" suddenly used as much fuel as the "rich", world fuel consumption would treble right away.'² The United States alone has been consuming 42% of the world's production of aluminium, 33% of its copper, 44% of its coal, 33% of its oil and 63% of its natural gas. (ii) The median income of the United States families, according to a recent report, rose to \$12,840, while the poverty level for a non-farm family of four was set at \$5,038—ten times larger than the average income for a family of the same size in the Third World. The median income in Latin America at the beginning of this decade was \$440. In order for it to be raised to the level of the average income in the United States, 200 years would be needed. (iii) About ten thousand people die daily because of hunger. According to a recent statement by the General Secretary of the United Nations, 500 million people live at the edge of starvation. In Latin America, only 5% of the population have a diet comparable to that in the developed countries and between 20 and 30% consume an adequate number of calories. Forty-two million people suffer from malnutrition.

2. The breach between the haves and the have-nots, far from being reduced, is continually growing. According to one estimate, between 1950 and 1970 'the annual growth rate of the national income *per*

¹ *Encounter with Spurgeon* (London: John Clarke), p. 35.

² *Small is beautiful* (London: Sphere Books, 1974), p. 20.

capita in the rich countries was 46% bigger than in the poor countries.³ The hard facts of the situation cannot be magically changed by talking about 'developing countries' instead of 'underdeveloped countries' where about 65% of the people are today undernourished, by contrast with 38% in 1950. With a galloping population growth, which is itself a result of underdevelopment, at the beginning of this last quarter of the twentieth century the Third World has become the stage where the black apocalyptic horse has appeared and a voice is heard which says, 'A whole day's wage for a quart of flour, a whole day's wage for three quarts of barley-meal! But spare the olive and the vine' (Rev. 6: 6, NEB).

3. A number of reasons may be suggested to explain the great disparity between rich and poor nations. Thus, for instance, it may be pointed out that, because of the technological advances that took place in Europe beginning in the sixteenth century, the rich countries accumulated a surplus so that, by the time the Third World nations were free from their colonizers, the developed countries were too advanced technologically and economically for balance to be restored. Again, it may be said that the situation of the underdeveloped countries is due to their own failure to organize themselves politically, to government corruption, to lack of responsibility with regard to work. It may even be claimed that, in the case of the rich capitalistic countries, there is a close relationship between wealth and Protestant (and particularly Puritan) ethics.⁴

Whatever the value of these explanations, they must not obscure the fact that the development of the affluent and the underdevelopment of the poor cannot be regarded as two completely separate phenomena. The world has become a global village in which, as E. F. Schumacher puts it,

nothing succeeds like success, and nothing stagnates like stagnation. The successful province drains the life out of the unsuccessful, and without protection against the strong, the weak have no chance; either they remain weak or they must migrate and join the strong; they cannot effectively help themselves.⁵

One need not be a Marxist in order to recognize

³ Angelos Angelopoulos, *El Tercer Mundo frente a los países ricos* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones El Sol, 1974), p. 46.

⁴ The thesis that Protestant ethics favoured the rise of capitalism more than other creeds was developed over half a century ago by Max Weber in *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*. Cf. R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the rise of capitalism* (originally published in 1926; reprinted by Penguin Books, 1938).

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 60.

the fact that the main value of the poor countries to the rich consists in their role as suppliers of raw materials, cheap labour and food stuffs, and that the prices of these things are fixed by the buyers on the basis of the law of supply and demand. Even if it is admitted that if the Third World were closed to foreign capital, that would not greatly affect the rich countries, which are practically self-sufficient, there can be no denying that 'underdevelopment can only be understood if one understands the basic facts of dependency.'⁶

Once this is recognized, however, it is no longer possible to speak of underdevelopment as a merely *economic* problem with regard to which the affluent nations have no moral responsibility. Whatever the causes that have created the great gulf between rich and poor nations, the naked fact is that as things stand *now* the rich are able to exploit the poor in order to become richer, while the poor are at the mercy of the blind law of supply and demand, operating in the international markets. As long as the developed nations act on the basis of economic pragmatism and political expediency, with no concern for ethics, there is no way out for the underdeveloped countries. As long as wealth is held to be an absolute right that the developed nations can use for their own aggrandizement and comfort, the poverty of the underdeveloped nations is inevitable.

The myth of economic growth

The United States of America is today the wealthiest and most powerful country of the world. How did it get there? No answer will account for all the facts, but it is clear that, whatever the answer, it must include a recognition of the role that capitalism has played in the making of this nation. The American system is built on faith in free enterprise, hope of profit, and love of achievement. Regardless of what one may think concerning the viability of capitalism for other countries, one has to admit that in the case of the United States this system has succeeded in giving people a very high standard of living.

In the light of the material accomplishments of the American system, it is not difficult to understand those who maintain that *economic growth* is the only way out of poverty for the Third World. In their view, underdevelopment is basically an economic problem that can be solved through the use of technology to improve production and distribution. Development will come through economic growth. By the power of technology, the poor countries will necessarily follow the West in its

⁶ Peter L. Berger, *Pyramids of sacrifice* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1976), p. 58.

ascent from poverty to affluence—and they will attain the ideal of ‘plenty for all’ within a span of time considerably shorter than that required by the United States to get where it is now. This is redemption by way of imitation.

Should anybody object to this development model by pointing to the great disparities between rich and poor in countries where it has been adopted, the answer is ready-made—wealth and poverty must coexist for a time, but eventually the benefits will extend to all. Accordingly,

the message to the poor and discontent is that they must not impatiently upset or kill the goose that will assuredly, in due course, lay eggs also for them. And the message to the rich is that they must be intelligent enough from time to time to help the poor, because this is the way by which they will become richer still.⁷

Closely connected with the concepts of progress and technological control, the idea of economic growth as the answer to underdevelopment is an expression of a secularized biblical eschatology. As Peter L. Berger has pointed out, it can only be understood within the larger frame of reference provided by *modernity*.⁸ ‘At the heart of the myth of growth is the vision of the “cargo cult”—arrival of all the wondrous gifts of modernity in plentiful supply for all.’⁹ All over the underdeveloped world, capitalism will in time usher in a new era in which there will be plenty of products to choose from, private property will be an absolute right, success will be the highest value, and free enterprise will be fostered, all this in a context of political democracy. A universal consumer society, modelled on the ‘American way of life’, will thus be the final solution to underdevelopment!

The myth of growth, which is at the basis of the consumer society, is the vision of reality that the big multinational corporations are spreading throughout the world today. With the help of advertizing, it projects its image of happiness—the *homo consumens*—even into the reign of poverty. The TV set is the symbol of a mythological mentality obsessed with industrial products not only in the wealthy suburbs of New York or Los Angeles, but also in the slums of Bombay or Buenos Aires. The whole world is becoming a village united around the principle of consumerism.

⁷ E. F. Schumacher, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁸ ‘Modernity means (in intention if not in fact) that men take control over the world and over themselves. *What previously was experienced as fate now becomes an arena of choices.*’ (Peter L. Berger, *op. cit.*, p. 20, underlining his.) Cf. Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *The homeless mind* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

⁹ *Pyramids of sacrifice*, p. 45.

Over against the myth of growth the Word of God must be proclaimed as a vision of reality in which people are seen in their interdependence with God, with neighbour and with nature.

1. In his State of the Union Address in 1970, ex-President Nixon spoke of the economic expansion in the United States during the sixties. Then he added: ‘But in the same ten-year period we witnessed the greatest growth in crime, the greatest increase in inflation, the greatest social unrest in America in a hundred years. Never has a nation seemed to have had so much and enjoyed it less.’ This was said of a nation where millions of people are regular churchgoers but where, in the words of a modern American prophet, ‘the Constantinian Accommodation has been marvellously proliferated’.¹⁰ The time has come for this nation to hear, ‘Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions’ (Lk. 12: 15); ‘You cannot serve God and mammon’ (Mt. 6: 23); ‘Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’ (Mt. 4: 4). But how will it hear if the church herself, far from being a factor for the transformation of society, becomes merely another reflection of society and (what is worse) another instrument that society uses to condition people to its materialistic values?¹¹

2. The advocates of the myth of growth assume that the material prosperity that characterized ‘the American way of life’ is possible for all, including the starving millions in the Third World, and that it is possible on the basis of a materialistic approach to life. All the evidence shows, however, that this is the way back to Babel, the city of chaos. The gulf between the rich and the poor continues to grow—the poor are becoming increasingly poorer and the rich increasingly richer. To practically all the international conferences called for the purpose of dealing with this problem, the comment made by a British tabloid on this year’s meeting of the General Assembly of the Organization of American States is applicable: ‘flowered phrases, false friendships—and no decisions taken.’ Materialism, on which the pursuit of wealth is based, has no built-in limiting principle. The very survival of our race is uncertain unless people in the affluent countries are delivered from materialism—an ideology that fosters greed and leaves very little room for sacrificial service—and take to heart the unity of human existence. As Senator Mark O. Hatfield

¹⁰ William Stringfellow, *An ethic for Christians and other aliens in a strange land* (Waco: Word Books, 1974), p. 46.

¹¹ Cf. my chapter on ‘Spiritual conflict’ in *The new face of evangelicalism*, ed. C. René Padilla (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1976), pp. 213ff.

stated at the National Prayer Breakfast in January 1976, 'What we require at this juncture in our history is a new revolution—a spiritual revolution that transforms our values and reshapes our corporate life.'¹² Economic growth as a solution to the problem of hunger in the Third World is no solution—it can produce a rich society that feeds on the poverty of the many, but it cannot create a just society in which people are members of one another, nor a world in which the nations live in peace. There is no solution without *metanoia*, without a total reorientation of life concretely expressed in terms of a revised standard of living. And the place to begin is in the church, which through the Word of God is to recognize that

there is nothing in Christian social teaching to support the widely held view that men have an inalienable human right to an ever rising standard of life, regardless of what is happening to other men in the neighbouring borough, on the other side of the tracks, or on the other side of the world.¹³

A religion that fails to promote justice is a far cry from biblical Christianity. The God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, who continues to speak through Scripture, is a God who wills justice. And the fast he has chosen is this: 'to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke . . . to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh' (Is. 58: 6f.).

3. The 1968 UNESCO Conference on Ecology concluded that 'if present industrial procedure continues, about 200 years remain before the planet begins to be uninhabitable because of air pollution'. A number of ecological studies published since then have clearly shown that natural resources are not unlimited and that technological success implies the destruction of the environment. And yet the assumption continues to be made that the so-called growth economy should not only be maintained in the rich countries but also extended to the poor! That this assumption should continue to be held in the face of the spectre of ecological doom is just a symptom of the blindness produced by a myth. If a small percentage of the world's population, in order to attain a very high standard of

living, has already plundered the earth, what kind of folly is this that would attempt to raise all to parity with the rich? Even if the resources were available, what would that mean for human life on the planet Earth? As never before, the demand of the hour is a prophetic call to a Christian discipleship that takes stewardship seriously and rejects *excess*—that 'ruthless, unbridled, unthinking excess'¹⁴ that marks the way of life in the affluent West. 'How can we begin to discern greed and envy?', asks E. F. Schumacher. And he replies:

Perhaps by being much less greedy and envious ourselves; perhaps by reducing the temptation of letting our luxuries become needs; and perhaps by even scrutinising our needs to see if they cannot be simplified and reduced.¹⁵

The myth of revolution

We have sinned against God for we have failed to see that, according to his design, life is meant to be lived in interdependence. We have made for ourselves graven images. We have refused to be our brother's keeper. We have exploited nature. How can this situation be redressed? How can justice be done to the poor? How can Christianity recover its relevance in a revolutionary situation? How can the church rise to the historical occasion?

The position is gaining ground today that the only alternative for the Third World, over against development through economic growth, is liberation through revolutionary socialism. The basic categories for understanding poverty, it is affirmed, are not development and underdevelopment, but domination and dependence. Poverty in the Third World is the other side of the coin to wealth in the affluent nations. More precisely, wealth is *always* the result of exploitation. If poverty is to disappear, imperialism must be eliminated through revolutionary violence. The only way out of poverty is liberation.

The theological version of this position is provided by the so-called 'theology of liberation'. At the risk of oversimplification, I would define it as an attempt (mainly identified with Latin America) to articulate a way of life that combines a Marxist analysis of historical reality with biblical insights. The claim is made that

a Christian option cannot take place except through mediations—a theological and ethical reflection which incorporates a certain analytical and ideological understanding of history into a

¹² 'Celebrating the year of liberation', *Christianity Today*, Vol. XX, No. 13 (26 March, 1976), p. 13.

¹³ Douglas Hyde, *Dedication and leadership* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), p. 154.

¹⁴ John V. Taylor, *Enough is enough* (London: SCM Press, 1975), p. 21.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 31.

careful and intelligent listening to the words of Scripture and the tradition of the Church.¹⁶

And the 'analytical and ideological understanding of history' chosen is that of 'scientific socialism'.

No full discussion of this position can here be attempted. I will limit myself to a few observations.

1. Like the myth of economic growth, the proposed overthrow of imperialism in order to usher in a new society can only be understood within the framework of the mythology of modernity, with its secularized biblical eschatology. Its advocates bear the mark of the Western world—at least in their action if not in their thinking, they cannot go beyond a technocratic society able to provide 'all the wondrous gifts of modernity in plentiful supply for all' (Berger). As a matter of fact, their socialism is, in Jacques Ellul's words, 'a means to accomplish that which capitalism has already accomplished elsewhere.'¹⁷ It is true, of course, that the myth of revolution carries with it an amount of 'counter-modern themes', outstandingly the search for a redemptive community.¹⁸ In actual practice, however, the critique of growth is also largely applicable at least to the Soviet model of growth. As Peter L. Berger puts it, 'The apocalyptic angels become Pavlovian dogs.'¹⁹

2. Those who maintain this position are quick to point out the avarice, selfishness, and dehumanizing effects of the capitalist form of production. 'Insofar as this sham culture kills in the people even the awareness of their condition of dependence and exploitation,' it is said, 'it destroys the very core of their humanity: the decision to stand up and become agents of their own history.'²⁰ True! Exactly the same judgment, however, can be turned against the socialist system. No-one who has read Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag archipelago* and is superficially acquainted with the social cost at which communist totalitarianism has been imposed and maintained in Russia, China and the Eastern European countries, can ever believe that capitalism has a monopoly on a selfish and arbitrary use of power. Exploitation and violence, torture and terror, jailings and murders, have no ideological convictions—they are equally serviceable across all kinds of political boundaries. 'To believe that Russia (or any of the other communist countries, we may add) has got rid of the evils of capitalism

takes a special kind of mind. It is the same kind that believes that Holy Roller has got rid of sin.'²¹

3. Over against the myth of revolution, the Word of God must be proclaimed as the power of God already at work to create a new community. It is not accidental that the advocates of that myth are unable to agree with regard to the kind of socialism that is most desirable for the Third World—their projects of liberation are essentially utopian; their new society is a phantom with no historical reality. As Christians we are called to work on small but concrete changes *here and now*, within the existing system. To be sure, we will undoubtedly be criticized by those who seem to believe that simply by adopting a Marxist sociological analysis of reality they have *ipso facto* become the agents of radical change. But our task is to discover the relation between God's universal sovereignty and creature responsibility in terms of a practical obedience modelled on Jesus Christ, and small changes are better than great (though beautiful) dreams.

God's new creation

Thought and action related to human life in the world are permeated with mythology. Expelled from Paradise, humanity is increasingly searching for a way back. All of history may be interpreted as a history of unconscious attempts to return to a primeval state characterized by harmony with God, with neighbour, and with nature. The angel of the Lord guards the way to Eden with a flaming sword.

The contemporary attempts to achieve a new society, as we have seen, turn out to be different expressions of the mythology of modernity. Despite all appearances to the contrary, both the myth of economic growth and the myth of revolution are pushing man in the same direction—a totalitarian technocracy, a mechanized paradise under the spell of 'the rulers of this age'. The subhuman society imagined by Aldous Huxley in *Brave new world* and George Orwell in *1984* is proving to be far more real than we would have ever imagined a quarter of a century ago.

Preaching in this context cannot be anything but a way to point to the kingdom of God, to the future that has already begun in Jesus Christ, to the new creation that is taking shape in the womb of the old by the power of the Spirit. 'The time is fulfilled,

¹⁶ José Míguez Bonino, *Doing theology in a revolutionary situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 171.

¹⁷ Jacques Ellul, *¿Es posible la revolución?* (Madrid: Unión Editorial, 1974), p. 110. Only the Spanish translation was available to the author.

¹⁸ Cf. Peter L. Berger, *op. cit.*, pp. 24, 25.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁰ José Míguez Bonino, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

²¹ H. L. Mencken, quoted by Peter L. Berger, *op. cit.*, p. 64. Berger's affirmation with regard to Marxist governments is indisputable: 'These systems are ruled by political elites which, whatever the original circumstances in which they came to power, have progressively suppressed the actual or potential checks on that power. This thrust toward absolute power carries with it a growing threat of arbitrariness and corruption' (*ibid.*, p. 93).

and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel' (Mk. 1: 14).

Because Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, we can look at the future with hope. The powers of the new age have been released in history. Consequently, we are called to be 'steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord', knowing that in the Lord our work is 'not in vain' (1 Cor. 15: 58). We do not have to wait for a total change of the structures of society (promoted by us or by others) to take place before we begin to act as members of a new society—we are God's 'workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them' (Eph. 2: 10). We need not wait for a sort of 'metaphysical jump' which will place humanity on a superior level before we begin to live as a 'cognitive minority', as 'a group of people whose view of the world differs significantly from the one generally taken for granted in their society.'²² We are not called to make a revolution but to lead a revolutionary life in the midst of the institutions of the world. And as Jacques Ellul has put it, 'More virtue is needed to accomplish a slow revolutionary action throughout an entire life than to die at a barricade.'²³

The gospel does not need to be ideologized in order to become relevant. It derives its relevance

from a vision of reality that stands over against man's myths—a vision of reality centred in the Lord Jesus Christ. In Jurgen Moltmann's words, 'Jesus himself stands between the Christological faith and the divinized lords who dominate this world, the personal and social cults, as well as the political fetishes of society.'²⁴ The purpose of preaching is to shape a new style of life which points to Jesus Christ—a sign of the kingdom that has already come and a promise of God's final future in which history will find its ultimate meaning. Man's myths speak of a progress that is no progress, for it lacks a real goal; the Word of God points to a destiny which is God's gift in Jesus Christ and can already be adumbrated in the church.

It is to be expected that in the face of the crisis of the world we feel overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness. We may even think that since we cannot make what we would regard as a significant contribution toward solving the problems, it is better to do nothing than to do too little. We then need to remember that 'it is the fact of *living*, with all its consequences, with all that it involves, which is the revolutionary *par excellence*.'²⁵ We are followers of a crucified and risen Lord who by his sacrifice has conquered the world.

²² Peter L. Berger, *A rumour of angels* (Penguin Books, 1970), p. 18.

²³ Jacques Ellul, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

²⁴ Jurgen Moltmann, *El Dios crucificado* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sigueme, 1975), p. 206.

²⁵ Jacques Ellul, *The presence of the kingdom* (London: SCM Press, 1951), p. 94.

Comparative methods and the patriarchal narratives

Martin J Selman

When John Bright's History of Israel seemed to ensure the rehabilitation of the patriarchal narratives in Genesis on the basis of comparative material from other Near Eastern cultures, many students rejoiced. But in the last few years this whole approach has been seriously called into question. In such an area the student feels at the mercy of the experts in ancient Semitic literature. So we are pleased to publish this assessment of the present state of the debate by Dr Selman, Tutor in Old Testament Studies at

Spurgeon's College, London, who recently completed his PhD thesis on 'Nuzi and the Patriarchs'. The article was first presented to the Old Testament Study Group of the Tyndale Fellowship at Cambridge in July 1976.

The twentieth century has witnessed a marked alteration in scholars' conclusions concerning the patriarchs. At the turn of the century, it was widely accepted that the stories about the patriarchs

possessed no historical basis but that they were probably the work of Israelite scribes of the monarchy period. There had been no such thing as a patriarchal era, since the scribes had merely projected back into an unknown past their own unhistorical understanding of Israel's genesis. Interpreters regularly explained the patriarchal narratives in terms of events and situations which could be dated no earlier than the first millennium BC. More recent opinion, however, which has gained ground steadily since the 1920s, has completely overturned this picture. The dominant view now is that a period frequently termed 'the patriarchal age' belongs with some certainty in ancient near eastern history at some time during the first half of the second millennium BC. Although the precise limits of this 'patriarchal age' will necessarily remain a matter of dispute for some time, very few scholars would deny at the present time that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob actually existed, and that their lives fit reasonably well against a historical backcloth.

One of the more surprising aspects of this change is that it has not been brought about by new information about the patriarchs themselves. In fact, we now possess no more direct evidence for Abraham than Wellhausen did when he first published his *Geschichte Israels* in 1878, or when Gunkel's commentary on Genesis first appeared in 1901. It is rather the vast increase of indirect evidence, literary and non-literary, which has enabled scholars to compare the patriarchal narratives with the rediscovered world of the ancient near east, particularly during the second millennium BC. Thus the study of topics such as name types, political movements and groupings, and family law has become a vital means of establishing parallel contacts between Genesis 12-50 and extrabiblical data, thereby enabling the patriarchs to be assigned to a comparatively fixed point in time.

Until recently, there has been little published discussion of methodology in the use of such parallels, although concern has been expressed occasionally.¹ The whole subject is of such crucial importance for a proper understanding of the background of the patriarchs, however, that the methods underlying the comparisons need to be carefully examined. An investigation of this kind is all the more vital at a time when both the parallels that have been claimed and the whole basis of this

kind of comparison are being seriously challenged.²

Normal procedure

Briefly described, the usual method involves the assembling of extrabiblical evidence having a particular point of contact with one or two biblical passages, thus enabling one to draw implications for the date of the patriarchs and the historical reliability of at least that section of the patriarchal narratives. This non-biblical material, however, is not always what it appears to be. For instance, the evidence for a particular custom is often based on a single cuneiform document, and only rarely are more than two or three sources involved, though such limitations are frequently not made clear. In addition, in those works widely used by Old Testament students and teachers, the extrabiblical material is usually given only in summary form, often with no mention of the primary source(s) or translation of the cuneiform evidence, perhaps because it is thought to be so well known.³ Thus anyone not acquainted with the extrabiblical text in question often has no real idea as to its extent or its contents. On many occasions too, the suggested parallel custom is automatically treated as though it were typical for the date and geographical location in which it occurs, though this cannot by any means be taken for granted.

It is also important to notice that, except in the case of two particular phrases,⁴ none of the comparisons that have been put forward for the patriarchs are actually identical. Rather, attention is drawn to similar features in the two areas, and the non-biblical data can function in three separate ways. The cuneiform material (a) may simply provide a further example of a similar practice without adding in any way to our understanding of the biblical passage in question, so that it acts as a straightforward parallel; e.g., the Nuzi texts compared with the sale of Esau's birthright (Gn. 25: 29-34)⁵ and the oral grant of Isaac's blessing (Gn. 27);⁶ (b) it may furnish a fuller background to a biblical passage; (e.g., Old Babylonian shepherding contracts and Genesis 31);⁷ or (c), sometimes, in addition to giving further background detail, it may offer an explanation of a poorly understood

² T. L. Thompson, *The historicity of the patriarchal narratives* (=BZAW 133), Berlin and New York, 1974 (cited as HPN); J. van Seters, *Abraham in history and tradition*, Yale, 1975 (cited as AHT).

³ E. A. Speiser in particular is exempt from this criticism.

⁴ 'kl ksp, lit. 'to consume silver' (Gn. 31: 15); and the supposed deathbed formula, 'and now I have grown old' (Gn. 27: 2).

⁵ C. H. Gordon, *BA* 3 (1940), p. 5.

⁶ E. A. Speiser, *JBL* 74 (1955), pp. 252-256.

⁷ J. J. Finkelstein, *JAOS* 88 (1968), pp. 30-36.

¹ E.g. E. A. Speiser, *JBL* 74 (1955), p. 254; J. van Seters, *JBL* 87 (1968), pp. 401f.

biblical custom; e.g., the Nuzi text Gadd 51 and Rachel's theft of Laban's gods (Gn. 31:19ff.)⁸; Hittite Laws §§46, 47 and Abraham's purchase of the cave of Machpelah (Gn. 23).⁹

The third of these functions deserves a closer examination. Since in these cases, features additional to those found in the Old Testament are introduced, the cuneiform material acts as more than a parallel. In such instances, the Mesopotamian evidence is used to fill gaps in our understanding of Old Testament customs, and there are important details in the cuneiform texts unparalleled in the Old Testament but which are a major feature of the comparison. This is quite clear, for example, in the case of Eliezer's adoption. The legal status of Abraham's steward cannot be deduced from the biblical text but depends entirely on extrabiblical analogies. It should be axiomatic that the element of elucidation involved depends upon the establishing of the validity of the initial parallel—the explanation is worthless if there is no basic agreement. This, however, is not always the case, as in the incident of Rachel's theft of the *teraphim*. Since the traditional understanding of the function of the household gods as a title to an inheritance is no longer valid for the Nuzi texts, the usual explanation of Rachel's action on the basis of Nuzi material must be rejected. Some other interpretation of Rachel's motives must be sought, such as the suggestion that she was seeking protection on her journey.¹⁰

This additional aspect of explanation in the parallels has featured prominently in traditional approaches to the patriarchal narratives in recent years, and on occasion it has involved a marked change in our understanding of certain passages. C. H. Gordon, for instance, was able to declare of the Jacob-Laban narratives that they had taken on 'an entirely new meaning in the light of the Nuzi documents'.¹¹ In one notable case, that of wife-sister marriage, the explanation proposed was sufficiently far-reaching for it to be suggested that the supposed original tradition of wife-sister marriage was not understood by those who brought together the biblical text. A hypothetical stage in the history of this particular tradition had to be reconstructed in order to provide a suitable link between Speiser's interpretation of the Nuzi texts and the present form of Genesis. It also had to be assumed that between the hypothetical stage and

the present form of the narratives, a major change had taken place in the understanding and purpose of the custom. This methodological weakness does not of itself make the proposed comparison invalid, but it does emphasize the frailty of the connecting link and the impossibility of proof.¹²

The main results of the current method concern the date of the patriarchs and the reliability of the patriarchal narratives. The date of the 'patriarchal age' given on the basis of the usual parallels varies from the beginning of the second millennium BC (Albright, Glueck), to the middle of the first half of the second millennium (Wright, Bright), to the 'Amarna age' (Gordon). The main support for Gordon's position, which represents a minority view, is that many of the relevant cuneiform texts (Nuzi, Ugarit, Alalah) date from after the midpoint of the millennium.

The second millennium date for the patriarchs in its various forms is based on a two-pronged argument. In addition to the extrabiblical parallels, it also takes into account certain differences between the customs described in Genesis and those of later Israel as found mainly in Exodus-Deuteronomy. This argument is partly an *ex silentio* one in that many of the patriarchal customs do not reappear in the rest of the Old Testament, but there are three explicit examples of different practices: (a), in Deuteronomy 21:15-17 an eldest son received a double share in the inheritance,¹³ whereas in Genesis the eldest appears to have received the whole or almost the whole of his father's property (Gn. 25:5-6); (b) marriage to two sisters is forbidden by Leviticus 18:18, though it was practised by Jacob; and (c), Abraham married his half-sister Sarah (Gn. 20:12), whereas this practice is proscribed in Leviticus 18:9, 11; 20:17; Deuteronomy 27:22 (*cf.* Ezk. 22:11; 2 Sa. 13:13).

Problems and criticisms

The now widely accepted view of the patriarchal period has of course never received universal acclaim. German scholars, in particular, though accepting a few of the better-known parallels,¹⁴ have exhibited little enthusiasm for this kind of approach, and the cuneiform material has made

¹² In fact, the theory of wife-sister marriage cannot be supported on either the Nuzi or the biblical evidence offered by Speiser. See C. J. Mullo Weir, 'The alleged Hurrian wife-sister motif in Genesis', *Transactions of the Glasgow University Oriental Society* 22 (1967), pp. 14-25; T. L. Thompson, *HPN*, pp. 234-248; M. J. Selman, *op. cit.*

¹³ Or perhaps 'two-thirds' (M. Noth, *Ursprünge des alten Israel*, Köln, 1961, pp. 19, 20; J. van Seters, *AHT*, p. 92).

¹⁴ E.g. G. von Rad, *Genesis* (London, 1972), pp. 184, 191, 192, 310.

⁸ C. J. Gadd, *RA* 23 (1926), No. 51; C. H. Gordon, *BA* 3 (1940), pp. 5f.

⁹ M. R. Lehmann, *BASOR* 129 (1953), pp. 15-18.

¹⁰ M. Greenberg, *JBL* 81 (1962), pp. 239-248; M. J. Selman, *TB* 27 (1976).

¹¹ C. H. Gordon, *BASOR* 66 (1937), p. 25.

little difference to their over-all view of the patriarchal narratives. Opposition has been mainly confined to brief comments, but more recently, much more detailed criticisms of the traditional arguments have been offered by T. L. Thompson and J. van Seters,¹⁵ and some of their objections will be considered in this section along with other material. Although Thompson and van Seters approach the subject from different perspectives, their contributions can be examined together, though only their more significant points can be discussed here.

1. The outstanding problem at the present time is that the cuneiform documents selected as parallels are usually merely isolated examples, and cannot be assumed to be representative in character. The extrabiblical texts have not always been related to other documents dealing with the same subject, whether from the same site or from different sites and periods. The most notable example of this concerns the custom of a barren wife presenting a slave girl to her husband to raise up children. The accounts of Sarah, Rachel and Leah¹⁶ in the patriarchal narratives are frequently compared with a single Nuzi text, *HSS 5 67*,¹⁷ but this tablet is not only the sole example of such a practice in Nuzi, it is actually untypical of the Nuzi texts as a whole. A Nuzi husband with a childless wife was much more likely to take a second wife (five examples) or a concubine (four examples). However, practices similar to that described in *HSS 5 67* are found elsewhere, in the Hammurapi laws of the Old Babylonian period, possibly in four private contracts of the same period, and in a Neo-Assyrian marriage contract of the seventh century BC.¹⁸ In this case, therefore, a custom parallel to that described in Genesis is found in different places and periods in the ancient world, and is not common at Nuzi. Another example concerns the Nuzi text (*JEN 204*) which is usually thought to record the sale of a birthright to a brother for the price of three sheep, so providing a background to the story of Jacob and Esau.¹⁹ The difficulty here is that *JEN 204* does not in fact indicate whether the eldest son was involved, or whether the land comprised the seller's entire inheritance, and in any

case the text must be compared with several other cuneiform texts from various sites in which part of an inheritance was sold.

Both these examples emphasize the absolute necessity of examining prospective parallel material in its proper context, and in many instances there is no shortage of available texts. In Nuzi alone, some 300 texts relating to family law are known, but only four or five are regularly considered in discussion of the patriarchal narratives.

Van Seters and Thompson have both recognized this weakness, though they have expressed their concerns somewhat differently from the way described above and from each other. Van Seters in particular is quite severe in his criticisms, even questioning the honesty of other scholars. In drawing attention to what he calls the 'almost exclusive' (p. 66) concentration on second millennium sources, though acknowledging that this is partly due to the greater number of texts available from the second as compared with the first millennium, he sees the primary reason as 'the prejudicial treatment that the second millennium has had in the area of law and social customs, which was a direct influence from Old Testament studies' (p. 67). He further asserts that 'there was simply an assumption beforehand that the patriarchal folk culture must be second-millennium and that anything later was irrelevant' (p. 67). Van Seters then goes on from these unhelpful comments to draw several links between extrabiblical first millennium sources and the patriarchal narratives in support of his main contention that the Abraham stories are a literary creation of the exilic and post-exilic eras.²⁰ However, he is only able to arrive at this conclusion by a marked preference for first millennium sources and a cavalier dismissal of evidence from the second millennium texts. The greater numerical weight of relevant second millennium material cannot be so easily cast aside.

Thompson is even more negative than van Seters about the value of the cuneiform texts. Whereas van Seters is confident that a mid-first millennium date for the patriarchs can be based partly on external contacts, Thompson feels that it is impossible to date patriarchal practices to any specific period because of the serious lack of sources, even for the comparatively well-known period in the first part of the second millennium. Such links as do exist between Genesis 12-50 and extrabiblical texts are of so general a character that 'any attempt to place them chronologically or geographically seems hopeless'.²¹ Nevertheless, Thompson does

¹⁵ For bibliographical details, see n. 2.

¹⁶ Gn. 16: 1-4; 30: 1-13.

¹⁷ E. Chiera, *Harvard Semitic Series 5* (Cambridge (Mass.), 1929, No. 67 (text); translation in E. A. Speiser, *AASOR 10* (1928) [pub. 1930], No. 2, and J. B. Pritchard (ed.) *ANET*, p. 220.

¹⁸ M. J. Selman, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ E. Chiera, *Joint expedition to Nuzi 2* (Paris, 1930), No. 204 (text); translation in E. Cassin, *L'Adoption à Nuzi* (Paris, 1938), pp. 230ff., and H. Lewy, *Orientalia*, New Series 9 (1940), pp. 369f.

²⁰ *AHT*, pp. 310ff.

²¹ *HPN*, p. 294.

make an attempt to examine the patriarchal narratives against a much wider background of extrabiblical texts than is usually the case, but his achievement does not match up to his good intentions. In Thompson's discussion of Eliezer's possible adoption, for instance, he discusses only eleven of the Nuzi real sonship adoption contracts against an actual total of almost fifty documents, which though it represents an improvement on the maximum of five texts normally considered, still falls far short of an adequate investigation.

2. A problem closely related to the previous discussion is the difficulty of using customs in the ancient world for dating purposes, since individual practices tend to continue in a variety of places over a very long period. Notice, for example, the custom described above of a barren wife's slave girl producing children for her mistress known in Mesopotamia for over a thousand years; or the use of the term 'great sin' as a synonym for adultery in thirteenth century Ugarit and in Egypt in the ninth to sixth centuries, a phrase which also appears in Genesis 20: 9 and 26: 10.²² Noting a variation of some 800 years in the dates suggested for the 'patriarchal age', ranging from the beginning of the second millennium as advocated by Albright and Glueck, to the early settlement period according to Noth and Eissfeldt, Van Seters has argued that therefore a historical period has not really been established at all.²³ Although of course, no individual scholar uses so wide a range of dates, and the large majority prefer a period between the twentieth and seventeenth centuries, the problem of chronological imprecision, which is particularly acute as far as social customs are concerned, remains.

3. A different kind of problem, and one to which there is no complete solution, involves a recognition of the limitations of the biblical passages concerned. Whereas the extrabiblical data are sometimes comparatively plentiful, most customs are only briefly described in Genesis, several of them in only a single passage. Since in most cases they are incidental to the main thrust of the context, and many of their details are omitted, it is never possible to form a complete picture of any individual practice. It is only natural in such situations to attempt to fill in at least some of the gaps in our knowledge, but great care is essential to ensure that justice is done to the biblical context. In particular, it is not good methodology to put forward an explanation of a poorly understood patriarchal custom on the basis of one which is equally uncertain in the cuneiform

material, as was done, for instance, in the case of the theory of wife-sister marriage.²⁴ Even in a case where the non-biblical evidence provides a reasonable explanation for a patriarchal practice, as with Eliezer's adoption, the limits of the biblical context must be carefully weighed.

4. Thompson raises the matter of the relationship between the cultural parallels and the documentary hypothesis, a difficulty which he argues has been largely ignored. If it is accepted that some of the patriarchal traditions go back to the first half of the second millennium, then according to Thompson two particular problems emerge; (a) that the tradition must be assumed to be intact for some 800 years, and (b) that the independence of the Genesis pericopes and the increasing fragmentation of sources the further one goes back in time is ignored.

These two factors do cause genuine problems for the documentary hypothesis which current theories of the transmission of early tradition have barely recognized. In practice scholars have simply treated the supposed early traditions of the patriarchal narratives as sources which somehow became incorporated into J, E and P. There are of course differences in detail about the way in which individual scholars have dealt with this problem,²⁵ but those passages with early parallels have usually been loosely appended to literary theories of Pentateuchal criticism without either of them being greatly affected. Conservative scholars have in practice assumed a similar procedure, except that they would prefer an earlier date for the compilation and final writing and a less complicated 'history of tradition'. There is, however, a basic similarity in that accounts of particular patriarchal events remained essentially untouched for several centuries before their inclusion in the final form of Genesis.

Thompson therefore offers an alternative approach in which he maintains the unhistorical character of the patriarchal narratives, thus removing any real link with the second millennium. In practice, however, whatever view one takes of the prehistory of the patriarchal narratives, there is very little direct external evidence on which to base one's opinions. Current theories of pentateuchal composition are based largely on internal criteria and analogies from other literatures, some of them far removed in time and location from Palestine in the biblical period. If ancient near eastern data suggest that at least some parts of Genesis may date

²² See above, n. 12.

²³ W. L. Moran, *JNES* 18 (1959), pp. 280f.; J. J. Rabinowitz, *ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁴ *AHT*, pp. 9, 10.

²⁵ Compare, for instance, the Genesis commentaries by Speiser (Anchor Bible, New York, 1964) and von Rad (London, 3rd ed., 1972).

from the early or mid-second millennium, then it is not good method to overthrow this just because it causes difficulties for widely accepted but unproven theories. Thompson's remarkable statement that 'what is objective in archaeology are the potsherds, and in biblical criticism, the manuscripts' (p. 7) also needs correction. The cuneiform textual discoveries have a greater intrinsic objective relevance in this matter than the usually non-literary potsherds, and they provide a necessary alternative perspective alongside the results obtained by biblical scholars using the methods of literary criticism, form criticism and the history of traditions. Thompson's attempt to put the clock back fifty years by returning to the approach of Gunkel is unconvincing because it fails to take proper account of textual material unearthed by archaeology in the last half century or more. One cannot simply assert the folkloristic nature of the patriarchal narratives, while at the same time treating the cuneiform material as largely irrelevant. The cuneiform tablets provide original evidence, and if some of them describe aspects of life similar to those found in the patriarchal narratives, then the reasons must be investigated.

5. A further question raised by Thompson is whether the difference in form between the legal records of Mesopotamia and Syria and the narratives of Genesis allows any real comparison between them at all, since he argues that in some cases the Genesis stories do not reflect the practice of any group of people.²⁶ Thompson seems to have missed the point, however, since it is content rather than form which comprises the main grounds for comparison, and it is on the basis of content that he seeks to prove that the cuneiform materials are irrelevant for the patriarchal narratives. In any case, descriptions of customs in the ancient world were not confined to one type of text. In the Ugaritic tablets, for instance, the myths and epic literature provide an important source for the study of family law.²⁷

Occasional attempts have been made to prove that the form of certain types of Mesopotamian contracts can be traced in parts of the patriarchal narratives, but they have generally been unsuccessful. Speiser's efforts to find the main elements of a Nuzi sistership adoption contract in Genesis 24, for instance, can no longer be upheld.²⁸ Similarly, the

²⁶ *HPN*, p. 294.

²⁷ A. van Selms, *Marriage and family life in Ugaritic literature* (London, 1954); A. F. Rainey, 'Family relationships in Ugarit', *Orientalia*, New Series 34 (1965), pp. 10-22.

²⁸ E. A. Speiser, in A. Altmann (ed.), *Biblical and other studies* (Cambridge (Mass.), 1963), pp. 26, 27; *idem*, *Genesis* (New York, 1964), pp. 180f., 184f.; cf. M. J. Selman, *op. cit.*

thesis that Neo-Babylonian 'dialogue documents' form the background to Genesis 23²⁹ can only be valid if the account of Abraham's purchase was preserved in a recognizable contract form. The dialogue in Genesis 23, however, is too general to warrant such a description, so that the main support for a formal comparison disappears.³⁰

Alternatives and conclusions

Although some problems have clearly arisen in recent assessments of parallels to the patriarchal narratives, this does not mean that the cuneiform documents must now be treated with considerable suspicion, and that for all practical purposes they are of little value for the patriarchs. On the contrary, a stage has now been reached where initial enthusiasm must be supported by careful and accurate scholarship. Methods need to be refined and improved, not rejected altogether, since it is clear that parallels do exist in a wide range of cuneiform sources.³¹ In this way, the background of the patriarchal narratives can be more clearly depicted, with genuine examples no longer being hampered by their association with other results reached at a time when more detailed evidence was not available. The need for certain safeguards is clear, however, and the following are offered as one set of suggestions.

1. It is absolutely essential that proposed parallel texts should first be thoroughly examined in their own context before any meaningful comparison with the Old Testament can be attempted. Three levels may be distinguished in this procedure. Firstly, in each individual text, due attention must be paid to literary character, date, and geographical location. As a second stage, further material of a similar nature from the same site should be considered,³² and finally, comparison made with similar texts from different sites and periods, including of course, any relevant first and second millennium data, though one must accept for the present that much less is available from the first millennium. This wider perspective is essential, and in fact it is only by synchronic and diachronic surveys of this kind that the real worth of an

²⁹ G. M. Tucker, *JBL* 85 (1966), pp. 77-84; H. Petschow, *JCS* 19 (1965), pp. 103-120.

³⁰ In any case, Tucker's comparative argument (*op. cit.*, pp. 82ff.) relates only to the last part of the chapter (verses 16ff.), whereas this is an integral part of the dialogue beginning at verse 3.

³¹ E.g., C. J. Mullo Weir, in D. W. Thomas (ed.), *Archaeology and Old Testament study* (Oxford, 1967), pp. 73-86; M. J. Selman, *op. cit.*

³² There is a real need for further work similar to R. Harris' demographic study of the Babylonian city of Sippar in the Old Babylonian period (*Ancient Sippar*, Istanbul, 1975).

individual item can be evaluated. Its importance may be emphasized by a glance at practices related to birthright. Although it was generally recognized in the ancient near east that an eldest son received a larger inheritance share, the proportion could vary enormously. In Mari the eldest son received two-thirds of the estate,²² but he enjoyed a double share in Nuzi, Old Babylonian Larsa, Assyria in the Middle Assyrian period, and in Israel according to Deuteronomy 21: 17. In Middle Babylonian Nippur and Ur the advantage amounted to an extra 10%, whereas among the patriarchs the eldest seems to have taken almost the entire inheritance.²⁴ Even within this list of examples, different principles were in use at the same site in the same period.

2. In view of the continued existence of some customs over a period of centuries, great care is required when they are used for dating purposes. In fact, as a general rule, customs do not provide good evidence for chronology, though there may be certain exceptions. To qualify as relevant material for dating, there should be good evidence to show that a particular custom did not exist in another period, or that it existed in a different form. It is not generally sufficient to point to a single text that apparently provides a parallel, but if that is all that is available because of the uneven nature of archaeological discovery, appropriate caution should be exercised.

3. Although form criticism has been described as 'a methodologically reliable way of comparing biblical texts with Ancient Oriental and Hellenistic texts',²⁵ such optimism can hardly be applied to the present subject. The widely differing nature of the material prevents a straightforward comparison of forms. The Genesis narratives cannot be construed as though they were contracts of the type found in cuneiform tablets, though this does not prohibit a comparison of their contents. In fact, the literary character of each individual text needs to be duly recognized, and their special limitations noted. Narrative, for instance, often contains many personal details which a cuneiform contract does not, and its style is much freer in comparison with the stereotyped phraseology of legal documents. It is also important to determine the purpose of

each text. An examination of Old Babylonian marriage documents, for example, reveals that many of them depict 'abnormal family situations', and that a written version of a marriage agreement was used mainly for 'legally vulnerable persons'.²⁶ Similarly, a study of Nuzi wills has concluded that 'wills were drawn at Nuzi only in unusual circumstances'.²⁷ The function of an individual text therefore could be perhaps to underline normal practice, or it may have the quite different purpose of making clear an exception. Considerations such as these can fundamentally affect the understanding of a passage, and one needs at least to be aware of such possibilities.

4. An important factor that is sometimes overlooked is that the cuneiform tablets are preserved in the form of original documents. They can often be dated precisely, and their place of origin is also known in most cases. They thus provide very useful information describing current attitudes and practices of people at a verifiable time and place in ancient near eastern history, and at the same time, showing a marked contrast with the theoretical nature of our understanding of the precise origin and transmission of the patriarchal narratives. Objective data of this kind cannot be easily put aside, even where they conflict with hypotheses relating to the prehistory of the patriarchal narratives, and some explanation of these external factors must be attempted in an adequate account of the 'patriarchal age'.

5. Finally, some consideration should be given to the possible means of contact between the patriarchs and those parts of Mesopotamia from which the relevant parallels come, though this must inevitably remain partly hypothetical. Did the patriarchs borrow directly, for example, or was there a common source of customary law existing throughout the ancient near east? If the former is correct, did this transfer take place in the Harran area, through the Hapiru, or through the Hurrians either in Palestine or on the journey to Palestine (all these have been proposed), or did the process happen by some other means? Other important questions concern linguistic relationships (though this seems to be a major problem only if the Hurrians are involved), and the sociological dimension of the relationship between the customs of sedentary peoples, semi-nomads, and nomads, though this last point is also perhaps not the great

²² According to the one available text, G. Boyer, *Archives royales de Mari* 8 (Paris, 1957), No. 1; translated in *idem*, *Archives royales de Mari: traductions* 8 (Paris, 1958), No. 1; and by J. J. Finkelstein in J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *ANET*, p. 545, though Finkelstein translates 'a double share' on the basis of analogies from other sites.

²⁴ Gn. 25: 5, 6. It is noteworthy that all the available parallels to the firstborn's double share in Dt. 21: 17 come from the third quarter of the second millennium.

²⁵ K. Koch, *The growth of the biblical tradition* (London, 1969), p. 74.

²⁶ S. Greengus, *JAOS* 89 (1969), p. 512; cf. R. Harris, *JNES* 33 (1974), p. 368.

²⁷ J. S. Paradise, *Nuzi inheritance practices*, PhD dissertation (University of Pennsylvania, 1972), p. 12 (available on microfilm).

obstacle that van Seters has made it out to be. The patriarchs are not portrayed in the Old Testament as full nomads, since they exhibit several indications of settled life, and the cuneiform texts of both first and second millennia derive to a great extent from sedentary populations. Nevertheless, comparisons with nomadism and tribal activity as in the Mari letters is still of relevance, though such information needs to be used with care.

Only by giving due attention to the kind of guidelines suggested here can one gain a proper

understanding of the setting of the patriarchal narratives. One can no longer on the one hand cast aside the clear evidence of extrabiblical material of the first or second millennium, nor on the other embrace with uncritical enthusiasm the contents of an isolated text. There still exists much relevant material which, rightly handled, provides considerable illumination of the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and their families, and encourages confidence in the historical reliability of Genesis 12-50.

The forensic character of justification

Ronald Y K Fung

Ronald Fung, who now teaches at the China Graduate School of Theology in Hong Kong, was awarded his PhD (Manchester 1975) for a dissertation on Righteousness and faith in the thought of Paul, which is expected to be published before too long. The following article is based on a part of that research.

The purpose of this paper is not to try to establish from first principles the meanings of the terms employed by Paul in connexion with justification, but the much more modest one of simply indicating what we understand to be the correct interpretation of the terms and briefly defending this against some other interpretations.

Taking the verb *dikaion/dikaiousiai* first, we understand that the active form means 'to pronounce or declare righteous, to accept or treat as righteous', and that the passive form has the corresponding sense of 'being pronounced and treated as righteous'.¹ The basic idea is a forensic

one. This is emphasized *both* by Protestant exegetes like G. Schrenk, who writes: 'It may be conceded that the *usus forensis* is not given prominence in every passage by express emphasising of the judicial act. . . . Yet the idea of judgment is everywhere present',² and L. Morris, in whose opinion 'there is an ineluctable forensic element . . . whenever St Paul uses the term',³ and by the Catholic theologian H. Küng, who in a similar vein says: 'The idea of an act like that of a court is indeed not universally present, yet the association with a juridical situation is never absent.'⁴ We further agree with those who say that *dikaion* cannot mean 'to make righteous' in the ethical sense of making virtuous.⁵ Thus G. Schrenk rightly points out that 'for Paul the word *dikaion* does not suggest the infusion of moral qualities, a *justum efficere* in the sense of the creation of right conduct'.⁶ While it is possible, on the analogy of other verbs ending in—*oō* (e.g. *typhloō*, *douloō*), to accord the word *dikaioō* a factitive or causative force ('to make *dikaios*'), 'this meaning is extremely rare, if not altogether doubtful'.⁷ Moreover,

² Schrenk, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

³ Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 260; *cf.* p. 259.

⁴ H. Küng, *Justification* (London: Nelson, 1964), p. 200; *cf.* pp. 201f., and especially pp. 292–295.

⁵ So, e.g., C. K. Barrett, *The epistle to the Romans* (London: A. and C. Black, 1973), p. 75; Sanday and Headlam, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁶ Schrenk, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

⁷ Thayer, *op. cit.*, s.v. *dikaioō*, 1. *Cf.* Sanday and Head-

¹ *Cf.* J. H. Thayer, *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament* (New York, n.d.), s.v. *dikaioō*, 3; Arndt and Gingrich, s.v. 3a; W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *A critical and exegetical commentary on the epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1962), pp. 30f.; E. de W. Burton, *A critical and exegetical commentary on the epistle to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1968), pp. 473f.; G. Schrenk, *TDNT*, II, p. 215; J. Murray, *The epistle to the Romans I* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), pp. 358ff.; L. Morris, *The apostolic preaching of the cross*² (London: Tyndale Press, 1960), pp. 224ff. *passim*.

dikaioō belongs to that group of—*ōō* verbs which are 'derived from adjectives of moral as distinguished from physical meaning', where the sense is 'to regard as, to treat as, not to make';⁸ *axioō*, for example, never means 'to make worthy', but always 'to account, to judge, to declare, to treat as worthy'.⁹ Even more important than analogies with other words is the actual usage of the verb in the Septuagint¹⁰ and in Paul,¹¹ which seems to favour the view that it denotes basically a declaratory act rather than a making righteous.¹² Hence we believe that *dikaion* is to be understood in its declarative rather than strictly causative sense.

The noun *dikaioσynē* denotes in a moral and religious sense the characteristic required of men by God, fulfilment of the divine commands and uprightness of conduct, and is sometimes so used in Paul;¹³ this ethical sense is not, however, his characteristic or distinctive use of the term. In specifically Pauline thought, and corresponding to the judicial, declarative sense of *dikaion*, the noun *dikaioσynē* signifies what is variously described as 'the righteousness bestowed by God',¹⁴ 'acceptance with God',¹⁵ or 'a standing with God, . . . a status conferred on man by God on the grounds of the atoning work of Christ'.¹⁶ What appears in view in the specific use of *dikaioσynē*, then, is a man's

personal standing before God. Similarly, the *dikaioσ* is one who is acceptable with, approved of, and accepted by God;¹⁷ to put it differently, he is one who is put in the right with God, who is declared righteous by him.¹⁸

In brief, we concur with L. Morris and others in holding 'that justification is in essence a matter of right status or standing in the sight of God, the status which shows that we are accepted with Him'.¹⁹ We turn next to a few proposals in connection with justification which differ in one way or another from the view accepted above.

1. E. J. Goodspeed

Goodspeed believes that *dikaion* in Romans 3: 26, 30; 4: 5; 8: 30, 33; Galatians 3: 8 and elsewhere is to be given the sense 'to make upright'.²⁰ On the basis of Psalm 72: 13 (LXX: *edikaiōsa tēn kardian*) and Isaiah 50: 8 (LXX: *hoti engizei ho dikaiōsas me*), Goodspeed argues that the etymological presumption is with the sense 'to make upright', unless the context makes it impossible; and he speaks of the sense 'to declare righteous' as 'a new sense unknown to the LXX or to classical Greek'.²¹ He further seeks to justify his rendering by appealing to the fact that the believer is a new creation and that his union with God provides him with an escape from sin and the sinful nature.²²

As regards 'etymological presumption' in general, A. B. Davidson has warned that 'etymology is rarely a safe guide to the real meaning of words' and 'usage is the only safe guide'.²³ Turning to the particulars, we may note that in Isaiah 50: 8 the

lam, *op. cit.*, p. 31; Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 226, n. 1; and especially C. H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1954), p. 48.

⁸ J. H. Moulton and W. F. Howard, *A grammar of New Testament Greek*, II (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1968), p. 397.

⁹ So Thayer, *op. cit.*, s.v. *dikaioō*, 3; J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on epistles of St Paul from unpublished commentaries* (London: Macmillan 1895), p. 105.

¹⁰ Cf. Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 52: 'There are passages where *hišdiq* means to put a person in the right by declaring or judging him righteous, and while the LXX sometimes renders this by *dikaion apophainein* or *krinein*, in some cases where this meaning is required they use *dikaion*'; he cites as examples Ex. 23: 7 and Is. 5: 23. Cf. N. M. Watson, 'Some observations on the use of *dikaioō* in the Septuagint', *JBL* 79 (1960), pp. 255-266.

¹¹ One cannot over-emphasize the importance of the insight expressed by Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 57: 'The Pauline use of these terms *dikaioσynē*, *dikaioσ*, *dikaion* must be understood in the light of Septuagintal usage and the underlying Hebrew. The apostle wrote Greek, and read the LXX, but he was also familiar with the Hebrew original. Thus while his language largely follows that of the LXX, the Greek words are for him always coloured by their Hebrew association.' Cf. *idem*, *The epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Collins, 1970), p. 38.

¹² Cf. Schrenk, *op. cit.*, pp. 212-214, 215f.; Morris, *op. cit.*, pp. 233-235, 260, 261; J. A. Ziesler, *The meaning of righteousness in Paul* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 1, 58, 212.

¹³ Arndt and Gingrich, s.v. *dikaioσynē*, 2a, b.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, under 3.

¹⁵ Burton, *op. cit.*, pp. 469-471.

¹⁶ Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 258; cf. pp. 249, 250, 256. Cf. further, R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, I (London: SCM Press, 1969), pp. 272, 285.

¹⁷ Cf. Burton, *op. cit.*, p. 469; Thayer, *op. cit.*, s.v. *dikaioσ* 1d.; Morris, *op. cit.*, pp. 244, 246; B. Reicke, 'Paul's understanding of righteousness', in *Soli Deo gloria*, ed. J. M. Richards (Richmond, 1968), pp. 37-49.

¹⁸ Cf. Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p. 272; Schrenk, *op. cit.*, p. 190. C. K. Barrett, 'New Testament eschatology. I. Jewish and Pauline eschatology', *SJTh* 6 (1953), pp. 136-155 (p. 145, n. 3), says of *dikaioσ*, 'This adjective describes a relationship, not an ethical quality . . . ; if this is not grasped it is impossible to make sense of Paul's doctrine of justification.'

¹⁹ Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 266; cf. pp. 267, 271. Cf. further J. Buchanan, *Justification* (London: Banner of Truth, 1961), pp. 240, 243-245; G. E. Ladd, *A theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 437ff., esp. 443-447.

²⁰ See E. J. Goodspeed, 'Some Greek notes', *JBL* 73 (1954), pp. 84-92 (86-91) where he defends this rendering, earlier presented in *Problems of New Testament translation* (1954), pp. 143-146, against the criticism of B. M. Metzger in *Theology today* (January, 1946), p. 562. Goodspeed had a precursor in M. R. Vincent, *A critical and exegetical commentary on the epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1968), pp. 123-128.

²¹ Goodspeed, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 88f.

²³ A. B. Davidson, *The theology of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1961), p. 257, cf. p. 265. Cf. also D. Hill, *Greek words and Hebrew meanings* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 30.

twice-repeated *tis ho krinomenos moi?* distinctly suggests that *dikaiōsas* should be given a judicial sense; and even though *edikaiōsa* in Psalm 72: 13 is used in a moral sense,²⁴ this is hardly sufficient to establish the meaning 'to make upright' for *dikaioō* and to overthrow what B. M. Metzger calls 'the unmistakable evidence of the meaning of this verb in the Pauline epistles'.²⁵ As for the assertion that the sense 'declare righteous' is 'unknown in the LXX', sufficient refutation is provided by such references as Exodus 23: 7 (where the judge is told, *ou dikaiōseis ton asebē heneken dōrōn*), Deuteronomy 25: 1 (where Moses directs that the judges *dikaiōsōsin ton dikaion kai katagnōsin tou asebous*), and Isaiah 5: 23 (where a woe is pronounced on the *dikaiontas ton asebē heneken dōrōn kai to dikaion tou dikaiou airontas*). For in these passages, it just would not do to give *dikaion* the meaning 'to make upright'; some such sense as 'to acquit or declare righteous' alone fits the context. Finally, Goodspeed's appeal to the believer's being a new creation in union with God is ineffective, for the most it could do is to confirm the meaning of *dikaion* as 'to make upright' if this could be established independently; but, as we have seen, the facts rather point away from such a conclusion. Hence Goodspeed's bold and novel attempt must be considered unsuccessful.

2. C. K. Barrett

Barrett²⁶ argues that it is 'more in harmony with Paul's teaching as a whole to suppose that "to justify" (*dikaion*) does mean "to make righteous"; though 'righteous' here means not 'virtuous', but 'right', 'clear', 'acquitted' in God's court. Barrett describes 'the most popular modern interpretation of the Pauline verb "to justify" and the Pauline doctrine of justification' as follows: 'The verb means "to count, or treat as, righteous". Justification means that God treats sinful men as if they were of complete and unstained virtue.'²⁷ He then proceeds to bring 'two radical objections' against this interpretation. The first objection is linguistic: the hiph'il form of the Hebrew verb lying behind

²⁴ Translating as it does the Hebrew *zkh* (in piel)='to make or keep clean, pure'; cf. Brown, Driver and Briggs, s.v.; Schrenk, *op. cit.*, p. 213. It should be noted that even here *edikaiōsa* does not mean 'I made upright'.

²⁵ B. M. Metzger, as cited by Goodspeed, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

²⁶ Barrett, *Romans*, pp. 75f. Barrett's view has been considered 'the best solution' to the 'long discussions about the meaning of "to justify"': E. K. Lee, *A study in Romans* (London: SPCK, 1962), p. 72.

²⁷ Cf., for a similar description, M. Barth, 'Rechtfertigung. Versuch einer Auslegung paulinischer Texte im Rahmen des Alten und Neuen Testaments', *Analecta biblica* 42 (1970), pp. 139–209 (139), with reference to Sanday and Headlam, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

dikaion (*hišdq*) is regularly causative in meaning and cannot possibly be weakened so far as to mean 'to treat as righteous'. But that the Hebrew verb in question can be and is used in the sense 'to declare righteous' rather than 'to make righteous' is obvious from the passages already referred to in the last paragraph: Exodus 23: 7; Deuteronomy 25: 1; Isaiah 5: 23—in each case a form of the verb *šdq* in the hiph'il is used.²⁸

The second objection is doctrinal:

It may be said that this account of justification must lead either to Pelagianism (since faith itself will be treated as a righteous work, or at least as righteousness in germ), or to the kind of legal fiction which men feel instinctively is not legitimate even for God, if he be a moral being. Not even he may pretend that black is white.

This objection indeed applies to the popular interpretation as described by Barrett, but it is not really applicable to the view we have accepted, since the latter does not involve treating faith as a righteous work or even as righteousness in germ; neither does it entail any kind of legal fiction or element of pretence. The latter point is borne out by the following statement of G. Schrenk:

Righteousness is forensically ascribed to the believer. . . . Forensically does not mean 'as if' he were righteous, since the sovereign sentence of God is genuinely pronounced. Nor does it mean that moral rectitude is attained. What it does mean is that the man who has *dikaioσynē* is right before God.²⁹

Barrett's objections, therefore, would seem to be insufficient to require that *dikaion* be taken to mean 'to make righteous'.

3. H. Küng

If we have understood him correctly, Küng's statements appear rather confusing. Thus, on the

²⁸ Thus: Ex. 23: 7 *kī lō' ašdq rāsā'*; Dt. 25: 1, *wehišdqū eš haššaddiq*; Is. 5: 23, *mašdqē rāsā'*. Cf. Davidson, *op. cit.*, p. 267: 'To find right, or in the right, is the meaning of the Hiph., or to justify; or, with slightly different shades of meaning, to declare to be in the right, or show to have right on one's side'; N. M. Watson, 'Justification—a new look', *Aust. Bib. Rev.* 18 (1970), pp. 31–44 (41).

²⁹ Schrenk, *op. cit.*, p. 204. Cf. G. Bornkamm, *Paul* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971), p. 138; P. J. Achtemeier, 'Righteousness in the New Testament', *IDB IV*, pp. 91–99 (95b); Ladd, *op. cit.*, p. 445; K. Kertelge, 'Rechtfertigung bei Paulus' (Munster: Aschendorff, 1967), pp. 119f. N. M. Watson argues the same point from 'the creative power of the word in Hebrew thought', *art. cit.* (n.28) (p. 37); he also brings to bear upon the meaning of the verbs in question the OT conception of 'being as community being': 'An act which restores to a man his standing in the community really affects the man himself' (p. 41).

one hand, he rightly holds that 'justification, following Sacred Scripture's teaching, means a declaring just, a judicial event',³⁰ that 'the term "justification" as such expresses an actual declaration of justice and not an inner renewal',³¹ and that *dikaïosynē* is attributed 'not as a quality, but as a relationship'.³² On the other hand, he maintains that 'God's *declaration* of justice is, as *God's* declaration of justice, at the same time and in the same act, a *making just*';³³ that when 'God pronounces the verdict, "You are just," . . . the sinner *is* just, really and truly, outwardly and inwardly, wholly and completely. His sins *are* forgiven, and man is just in his heart'.³⁴ This second set of statements is possible for Küng because he makes a distinction between two senses of 'sanctification'—designated as, respectively, the Catholic understanding of it as 'primarily the objective and ontological holiness (*Heiligkeit*) achieved in man by God' and the Protestant emphasis on 'subjective and ethical sanctification (*Heiligung*) brought about by man'—and identifies justification with sanctification in the former sense (*i.e.* 'in the sense of an objective and ontological making holy brought about by God').³⁵ Hence he can quite consistently go on to say:³⁶

God's justification must be taken seriously; God does what he says. When God declares a man just, he draws him into the righteousness of God and thus he reflects (*sic*)³⁷ a transformation of man's very being. When God *says* a man is just, since it is *God* who says it, man is simultaneously *made* just. From this it follows that justification includes in itself all the effects which touch the very being of the man who is justified, and his effective transformation, and thus also includes a positive sanctification effected by God.

It is important for our purpose to observe that Küng immediately adds this significant admission: 'But it remains true that biblical and especially *the Pauline act of justifying* ("justification") *does not say this explicitly*.'³⁸ Indeed, it may be questioned if Pauline justification says this even by implication. While, according to Küng, the 'justice or holiness given to man through the justification of God (which) is the necessary foundation for any moral

sanctification of man'³⁹ refers to sanctification in the objective and ontological, not subjective and ethical, sense, yet since even this sanctification is achieved 'in man' by God and makes man just 'in his heart', it is difficult to see how it could be regarded as only 'objective' and not 'subjective and ethical'. If this reasoning is sound, then apart from his own admission already noted, it must be said against Küng's understanding of the matter that while (keeping to Küng's terminology) 'the objective and ontological making-holy' may well take place at the same time as 'justification', yet to regard it as taking place 'through' justification is to confuse justification with sanctification.⁴⁰

4. T. W. Manson

T. W. Manson⁴¹ disputes the legal sense of *dikaïoum* and prefers to regard it as a regal act instead, stating that 'in the Christian dispensation God's dealing with the sinner is removed from the law court into the throneroom'.⁴² From Romans 4: 2-8 Manson concludes that

'justify' in this sort of reasoning means not so much 'declare righteous' as 'regard as righteous', not so much 'acquit' as 'lay no charge' . . . He (*i.e.* God) doesn't declare that the unrighteous is righteous, but treats him as if he were. It is amnesty rather than acquittal that is involved here—a regal rather than a judicial act.⁴³

Manson is also led, by the phrase *chōris nomou* in Romans 3: 21, to remark:

'Apart from law' means what it says—that the proceedings are extra-legal. . . . But if the whole business is removed out of the sphere of law . . . and God acts not as administrator of the law but as king of his own kingdom and Father of his own children, then *dikaïoō* may mean not pronounce righteous, but regard as righteous. God does not acquit the guilty, he issues an amnesty or free pardon.⁴⁴

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 255.
⁴⁰ That the two should be kept distinct is recognized by Küng himself when he says (*ibid.*, p. 292): 'Justification and sanctification belong together, form a unity in the single event of salvation in Jesus Christ. This does not mean that justification and sanctification may be confused. A theological reduction of these two concepts to one would not correspond to exegetical findings.' Cf. Buchanan, *op. cit.*, pp. 128, 148, 204f., 401f., 405f., where repeated warning is given against confusing justification and sanctification; F. F. Bruce, *The epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Tyndale Press, 1963, p. 38, n. 2: 'Failure to observe the distinction leads to confusion in the interpretation of Paul.'
⁴¹ T. W. Manson, *On Paul and John*, ed. by M. Black (London: SCM Press, 1963), pp. 56ff.
⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 57.
⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 56.
⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 57. With the first sentence cf. the similar

³⁰ Küng, *op. cit.*, p. 205. Cf. p. 200; and n. 4 above.
³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 203.
³² *Ibid.*, p. 294.
³³ *Ibid.*, p. 204; cf. pp. 206, 210.
³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 204; cf. p. 225.
³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 254.
³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 294f.
³⁷ In view of the later phrase 'effective transformation', is 'effects' the word intended here?
³⁸ Küng, *op. cit.*, p. 295 (our italics); cf. p. 297.

In the light of the foregoing discussion, we venture the following criticisms. (i) In obtaining 'light on what Paul means by *dikaioō*'⁴⁵ from only two or three passages, Manson has not done justice to other passages, where other exegetes clearly recognize the thought of a legal verdict (e.g. Rom. 8: 33f.). (ii) When he says, 'There is no sense in declaring a man righteous unless he is righteous',⁴⁶ it is evident that he thinks of righteousness in the ethical sense; but if this is so, then even on his own showing an element of fiction is still involved in God's treating (as distinct from declaring) the unrighteous *as if* he were righteous. On the other hand, it makes sense to speak of God's declaring a man righteous if the meaning is that of conferring upon him a favourable standing, the question of his ethical righteousness not being in view at all.⁴⁷ (iii) It may be doubted that the phrase *chōris nomou* in Romans 3: 21 can bear the weight of interpretation which Manson placed upon it, as indicating that the proceedings of justification are entirely removed from the sphere of law. While the absoluteness of the negation is set forth both by the phrase itself and by its emphatic position in the sentence, the negation refers not to the *sphere* in which the proceedings of justification take place, but simply to the alleged *basis* on which a man can be adjudged righteous. *Chōris nomou* emphasizes the fact that 'legal obedience contributes nothing to evangelic righteousness';⁴⁸ but it does not thereby make justification an extra-legal process. (iv) If regard is had to Pauline passages other than those referred to by Manson, it is difficult to interpret justification merely in terms of amnesty or free pardon. E. de W. Burton, while recognizing that 'forgiveness is included in righteousness, either distinctly and explicitly, or by implication'—since in Jewish thought forgiveness of sins is a prerequisite for acceptance with God⁴⁹—roundly declares, 'The reduction of Paul's term, *dikaioō*, to a purely negative sense, "to pardon," is definitely excluded by the evidence.'⁵⁰ As such evidence he refers to passages (e.g. Rom. 3: 20, 28; 4: 2; Gal. 2: 16; 3: 11; 5: 4) in which *erga nomou* are explicitly mentioned as a ground of justification, though their adequacy as such a ground is equally explicitly

denied. The context of these passages⁵¹ 'makes it clear that works of law are thought of as inadequate not to secure the forgiveness of admitted sinners, but to win approval on ground of merit, which would leave no occasion for forgiveness';⁵² this shows that the term *dikaion* is not merely negative, meaning 'to pardon'.⁵³

5. J. Jeremias

Jeremias⁵⁴ maintains that in the Pauline use of *dikaion* 'the figure of court proceedings is absent'. To Jeremias, 'God's justification is an outpouring of grace which far exceeds the legal sphere', and 'even though the forensic concept is by no means lacking . . . the soteriological connotation governs his speech'; he asserts that 'as in the Pauline letters *dikaioyne (tou) theou* must be translated "God's salvation", so *dikaiousthai* must be rendered, "to find God's grace".'⁵⁵ Again he writes:

Although it is quite certain that justification is and remains a forensic action, God's amnesty,⁵⁶ nevertheless the forensic image is shattered. . . . The forgiveness, the good pleasure which God grants, is not only negative, *i.e.* an effacement of the past, but it is an antedonation of God's final gift. . . . As an antedonation of God's final acquittal, justification is pardon in the fullest sense.⁵⁷

Jeremias sums up his position finally as follows:

It remains true that justification is forgiveness, nothing but forgiveness. But justification is forgiveness in the fullest sense. It is not a mere covering up of the past. Rather, it is an antedonation of the full salvation; it is a new creation by God's Spirit; it is Christ taking possession of the life already now, already here.⁵⁸

⁵¹ We may note especially the idea of *kauchēsis* in Rom. 3: 27; 4: 2.

⁵² Burton, *op. cit.*, p. 474.

⁵³ Cf. A. Plummer, *A critical and exegetical commentary on the epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1966), p. 91 (on 2 Cor. 3: 9): 'By "righteousness" is meant that which is attributed to man when he is justified. Through faith in Christ man is more than forgiven; his debt is cancelled and he has something placed to his credit.'

⁵⁴ J. Jeremias, *The central message of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1963), pp. 51–66. Cf. *idem*, 'Die Gedankenführung in Röm. 4. Zum paulinischen Glaubensverständnis', in *Analecta biblica* 42 (1970), pp. 51–65 (53, 54).

⁵⁵ Jeremias, *Central message*, pp. 55, 56.

⁵⁶ Thus, interestingly, whereas Manson would set amnesty as a *regal* action over against the forensic action of acquittal, Jeremias here regards amnesty as a *legal* action.

⁵⁷ Jeremias, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

argument of M. R. Vincent (*op. cit.*, p. 127) from Phil. 3: 9b: 'But if the righteousness of faith is legally and forensically imputed, it is of the law.'

⁴⁵ Manson, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Cf. Sanday and Headlam, *op. cit.*, p. 30; Burton, *op. cit.*, p. 473.

⁴⁸ J. Denney, *EGT*, II, p. 39; cf. Murray, *op. cit.*, pp. 109, 110.

⁴⁹ Burton, *op. cit.*, p. 469; cf. p. 474, under (d).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 474.

There are two comments that we would venture on this understanding of justification. First, the emphasis upon justification being not merely negative pardon (as T. W. Manson apparently makes it) is well placed; but to explain justification as 'a new creation by God's Spirit' and the indwelling of Christ would seem to be confusing God's action *over* us on the basis of Christ's work *for* us with the work of the Spirit *in us*. It is, in other words, as in the case of H. Küng, to confuse justification and sanctification, which, though inseparably linked together, are logically distinct from each other. Secondly, it is entirely true that in *substance* justification has to do with the salvation-grace of God and that the outpouring of grace 'far exceeds the legal sphere'. This is well recognized and emphasized by G. Schrenk when he writes:

Naturally, the forensic element is only a figure for being righteous before God, and it is not to be pressed in terms of juridical logic. We are not now in the sphere of human jurisprudence. We are dealing with the divine Judge who is also the unlimited King. Hence the symbolic aspect . . . is not to be allowed to predominate by logically pursuing the forensic mode of apprehension. The legal aspect must be transposed at once into a divine key. The *ustificatio iniusti* is against all

human standards. The content bursts the forms and an act of grace replaces customary legal procedure.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that in *form* justification remains a forensic concept, as Jeremias himself concedes.⁶¹

Having discussed above the various proposals made by E. J. Goodspeed, C. K. Barrett, H. Küng, T. W. Manson and J. Jeremias, we are perhaps justified in maintaining that the correct view of justification is that which regards it as primarily a legal concept having to do with the question of man's acceptance with or standing before God.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Schrenk, *op. cit.*, pp. 204f. Cf. H. D. Wendland, *Die Mitte der paulinischen Botschaft* (Göttingen, 1935), pp. 27f.

⁶⁰ Cf. Schrenk, *op. cit.*, p. 215, n. 18, where he speaks of Paul's concern in the use of *dikaioō* as being 'to clothe the act of grace in legal imagery'. Cf. M. Barth, *op. cit.*, p. 141; p. 178, n. 108; G. Klein, 'Rechtfertigung im NT', *RGG* V, pp. 825-828 (827).

⁶¹ J. A. Ziesler contends that while 'the verb "justify" is used relationally, often with the forensic meaning "acquitt", . . . the noun, and the adjective *dikaiois*, have behavioural meanings' (*op. cit.*, p. 1; cf. pp. 212, 168). I have interacted to some extent with Ziesler's exegesis in my discussion of various passages in 'The relationship between righteousness and faith in the thought of Paul, as expressed in the letters to the Galatians and the Romans' (unpublished PhD thesis, Manchester University, 1975), e.g. vol. II, pp. 191f., n. 190 (on Phil. 3: 9).